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**Interconnections of the political: British political  
economy, agrarian governance, and early  
nineteenth-century Cuttack (1803-1850)**

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Thesis submitted for the degree of PhD in History

2012

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## Abstract

This dissertation brings together, as an integrated analytical field, political-economy in Britain and practices of agrarian governance in various parts of British India, focusing on the Cuttack division of Bengal Presidency in the first half of the nineteenth century. Following a trail of methodological debates through thinkers like David Ricardo, Richard Jones, James Mill, William Whewell, John Stuart Mill, and others, it argues that there was a major transformation in the epistemological field of political economy, which established the categories of production and distribution as contingent on globally varying assemblages of property and political power. During the same period, in British India, I further contend, the object of agrarian governance was shaped as a complex of property and political power—which I call the “political”—distributed between a range of landholders and landholding bodies, such as the state, big landlords, village headmen, cultivators, and the village itself. As I trace the governance of the “political” in Cuttack over the first half of the nineteenth century, through chapters on rent, property and village, I highlight its interconnections with other regions of British India, like the North Western Provinces or the Madras Presidency. These interconnections, I argue, emerged out of a spatio-temporal classificatory logic which assigned particular forms of the “political” for different localities, as varying instances of an original form prevailing in a putative ancient Hindu India. Finally, I turn towards quotidian disputes over appropriate locations in the “political” between a variety of landholders in Cuttack, which help in understanding the specific nature of agrarian power in Cuttack, by pointing out the limits of, and further reorientations in, the framework of governance. This dissertation is informed by a critique of several conceptual separations in the relevant historiography—between “metropolitan” and “local”, “theory” and “practice”, and “liberal theory” and “indigenous reality”.

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## Abbreviations

<i>BDR</i>	Balasore District Records
<i>BJC</i>	Bengal Judicial Consultations
<i>BRC</i>	Bengal Revenue Consultations
<i>BRP</i>	Board of Revenue Proceedings
<i>CDR</i>	Cuttack District Records
<i>IOR</i>	India Office Records
<i>OSA</i>	Orissa State Archives
<i>PP</i>	Parliamentary Papers
<i>SBOR</i>	Sadar Board of Revenue
<i>SBORP</i>	Sadar Board of Revenue Proceedings
<i>WBSA</i>	West Bengal State Archives

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I could have never imagined what land means to a people without reading Akhtarujman Ilias's *Khwabnama*. After writing this dissertation, I know that my blunt imagination will perhaps never allow me to understand, in the way Ilias did, the life-world of an agrarian community. But the wish remains. I thank Santanu, whose sensitivity never stopped surprising me, for asking me to read this book.

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## Chapter One

### **Beyond the inside-outside of agrarian pasts: political economy as local power in early nineteenth century British India**

This dissertation grew out of an unease with the analytical commonsense of South Asian agrarian history. Almost all of these works seemed to suggest that the past, and the present, of agrarian societies in South Asia was inescapably defined by what went on at the level of the small, the particular, the proximate, or the local. Quite expectedly, this isolation of the spatial level was also an analytical one. The simultaneous identification of the small as a distinct geographical site and a powerful explanatory tool rested on a series of hierarchized categorial binaries. These binaries—between abstract and concrete, universal and particular, theory and practice, imperial and local, western theory and indigenous reality—were the epistemological conditions of possibility of the analytical isolation of the local. The local was fashioned out of a seamless interweaving of geographical and epistemological metaphors. It stood for any form of social reality which, by being located at a geographical distance from the centre, seemed to be necessarily capable of lying in a space epistemologically distant and different from the universal. Its geographically bounded nature seemed to be its mark of difference from the boundless expanse of the universal. The local was distance as difference. Framed in this manner, it fast became an explanatory orthodoxy for the agrarian histories of South Asia.<sup>1</sup>

Immensely rich and insightful works emerged under the banner of the local. There was a proliferation in the studies of localities in British India which finely nuanced understandings of agrarian life in South Asia from the time of the beginnings of the East India Company's government to the present. It was clear that there was much to be gained by taking a deep, close, intense look at the lanes and by-lanes of multitudes of villages. The seduction of the small was irresistible. This dissertation could not avoid it. Despite the unease, it got fatally attracted to the agrarian conditions of one such locality in British India. I attempted to take a peek at the agrarian affairs

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<sup>1</sup>A detailed analysis of these works, in relation to the argument of the dissertation, will be made in the final section of this chapter.

of Cuttack, the nineteenth division of the Bengal Presidency, from 1803, when the Company's government entered this place, till the 1850s. And indeed, the alleys of agrarian life in Cuttack were mesmerizing. Yet often I stopped, to turn, look around, and re-locate myself in the quotidian maze of agrarian affairs in Cuttack. Interestingly, every time I found myself somewhere else. It was puzzling, as I knew I was in Cuttack, but not quite. The agrarian alleys of Cuttack did not take me to other places. They themselves were other places. If it is at all possible to name them, I will say, they were at the same time the myriad tiny villages of Cuttack, of the North Western Provinces, of the Madras Presidency, the Leadenhall street in London, the halls of the British Parliament, the lecture-rooms of the East India College in Hertfordshire, the impenetrable forests of Bamangatti, the fort of the ancient Raja of Orissa, and many more unnameable, unidentifiable locales.

This dissertation admits the analytical power of the local, but refuses to perceive the local as equivalent to a locality. Instead of positing the local as a specific geographical space which has the power of transforming everything that comes into it from outside, it questions the very binary of inside-outside, in order to recast the local as all those possible situations within an integrated analytical space where transformations of powerful categorial and institutional rationalities take place ceaselessly. The inside-outside binary is, in a certain sense, central to this dissertation. It is a recurrent motif in both the practices of agrarian governance in early nineteenth century British India, and the agrarian histories examining that period. It repeats itself in various guises, as oppositions between metropole and colony, theory and practice, western perceptions and indigenous reality, abstract and concrete, and other similar ones. In this dissertation, I try to unpack this binary by tracking a few of the many investments that went into the creation of an inside and an outside of agrarian affairs in British India. Over five chapters, I discuss epistemological debates within political economy in nineteenth century Britain, contentions between officials at various levels of the imperial and British Indian bureaucracy over categories and principles of agrarian governance, practices of agrarian governance in several localities, along with Cuttack, and a variety of strategies by landholders of different kinds in Cuttack negotiating the rationalities of rule.

These chapters put together a dynamic field of interrelations, conceptualized along the lines of a Deleuzian understanding of Foucault's *dispositif*. Deleuze notes that the *dispositif* or apparatus is, "...a tangle, a multilinear ensemble. It is composed

of lines, each having a different nature. And the lines in the apparatus do not surround systems which are homogeneous in their own right, object, subject, language, and so on, but follow directions, trace balances which are always off balance, now drawing together and then distancing themselves from one another.”<sup>2</sup> The lines in the apparatus, he further argues, have four characteristics. There are lines which determine conditions of visibility and enunciation. There are lines of force, which generate continuous dynamism within the apparatus. Finally, there are lines of subjectification, which are points of breakage and fracture in the apparatus. They generate subjectivities which “escape from the powers and the forms of knowledge of one social apparatus in order to be reinserted in another, in forms which are yet to come into being.”<sup>3</sup> In this dissertation, such a reading of the apparatus is welded to Deleuze’s own concept of multiplicity. The space that is studied and made here, it can be said, is that of the multiplicity. It has, in Deleuze and Guattari’s words, “...neither subject, nor object, only determinations, magnitudes, and dimensions that cannot increase in number without the multiplicity changing in nature...There are no points and positions...such as those found in a structure, tree, or root. There are only lines...All multiplicities are flat.”<sup>4</sup>

It is not a story of the empire, though. It does not have the intention to argue, as Cooper and Stoler does, that “Europe was made by its imperial projects, as much as colonial encounters were shaped by conflicts within Europe itself.”<sup>5</sup> Their project, despite establishing the dynamic space of imperial circuits as the object of analysis, does not wish to dissolve the metropole-colony division.<sup>6</sup> This methodological move, however, has hardly inspired agrarian histories of South Asia. The only attempt imaginable, of rewriting South Asian agrarian history in the light of imperial formations, has been carried out by Richard Drayton. In his work Drayton throws up images of a vibrant, imperial theatre of “improvement”. He weaves together the emergence of Botanical science, imperial rivalries over control of science and its application in colonies, English nationalism emerging around questions of land and

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<sup>2</sup>Gilles Deleuze, ‘What is a Dispositif?’ in *Michel Foucault Philosopher*, ed. Timothy J. Armstrong, New York, 1992, 159.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid, 162.

<sup>4</sup>Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Minneapolis, 1987, 8-9.

<sup>5</sup>Introduction to *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeoisie World*, ed. Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler, Berkeley, 1997, 1.

<sup>6</sup>“...we treat metropole and colony in a single analytic field, addressing the weight one gives to causal connection and the primacy of agency in its different parts.” Ibid, 4.

agriculture and several other issues. But even Drayton's history remains trapped within the model of a diffusionist relation between the metropole and the colony. Ultimately, it becomes a history of the Kew Gardens in the context of the Victorian "revolution in government". It displays none of the dynamism that might be expected of what Cooper and Stoler identifies as an "imperial" space, generated by contestations at various levels of a network of practices in the unified analytical field of the metropole-colony. In Drayton's work, the regime of agricultural "improvement" remains essentially metropolitan.<sup>7</sup>

By exploring contestations within political economy in Britain over the first half of the nineteenth century, along with the agrarian conditions of an obscure locality in British India during the same period, I do not invoke the empire as the organizing space of these connections. I retain a spatial category as an analytical one precisely by questioning its essentially geographical meaning. For my purposes, the local remains important, but only as all those situations where dynamic transformations of meanings-in-practices take place. I do not argue that the local is already-always implicated in other more expansive spaces, like the regional, the national, the colonial, the metropolitan, the imperial, or the global. Such an argument implies that expansion of spatial scales necessarily lead to a refinement of the analytic. This approach is founded by a geographical reductionism, which ultimately reproduces the logic of those histories which reduce the explanatory power of the local to a geographical foundation. This dissertation attempts to write a history of agrarian conditions in Cuttack over the first half of the nineteenth century as a densely interwoven network of practices of knowledge and governance. In the process it demonstrates a series of transformations in the rationality of these practices, which took place in, and drew upon, a diversity of locales. I define this network as an apparatus. As Giorgio Agamben notes, an apparatus "...is a heterogeneous set that includes virtually anything, linguistic and non-linguistic, under the same heading: discourses, institutions, buildings, laws, police measures, philosophical propositions, and so on. *The apparatus itself is the network that is established between these elements...*"<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>See Richard Drayton, *Nature's Government: Science, Imperial Britain, and the 'Improvement' of the World*, New Delhi, 2005.

<sup>8</sup>Agamben further argues that "The apparatus always has a concrete strategic function and is always located in a power relation...As such, it appears at the intersection of power relations and relations of

## Contextualizing Cuttack

I will begin by noting the reasons behind choosing Cuttack as the point around which the apparatus is woven in this study. Cuttack was the nineteenth division of the Bengal Presidency, which the Company's government occupied in 1803, defeating its erstwhile Maratha rulers. The conquest of Cuttack was crucial to a geographic consolidation of Company rule. Cuttack occupied an area along the eastern coast of British India which began beyond the borders of the Midnapore district of the Bengal Presidency and continued up to the districts of Ganjam and Koraput, which were part of the Madras Presidency. Evidently, Cuttack was the missing link in the possibility of a continuous territorial consolidation of the Company's government. On top of that, being ruled by a strong regional force, the Marathas, from their headquarters in Nagpur, the area of Cuttack remained a potential gateway for threatening incursions of the Marathas into Company territory. This was reason enough for Wellesley to propose to the Raja of Nagpur the establishment of a British subsidiary force in the Raja's territories. Given its strategic location, it can be assumed that a total military control of this territory was necessary for the government. Predictably, therefore, as the Raja of Nagpur refused to permit the posting of Company soldiers in his territory, troops marched in and conquered the area of Cuttack. In December 1803, as the Treaty of Deogaon got concluded with Raghuji Bhonsla, the Raja of Nagpur and the Maratha chief, Cuttack came under Company rule.

The Company's government divided Cuttack was divided into two administrative areas—the Mughalbandi and the Garhjat. Mughalbandi was governed by Company regulations, while the Garhjat comprised of princely states. The Mughalbandi was divided into three districts, namely, Balasore, Cuttack and Puri. In 1804, the annual revenue of the Mughalbandi was estimated at Rs. 11,78,000. As an entire division within the Bengal Presidency, in terms of its revenue-yielding capacity, Cuttack was a tiny dot on the Company's financial map. Accordingly, it has been considered as an insignificant area of inquiry by agrarian historians of Bengal, who have fixed their attention to the bigger financial territories of Bengal. Also, these

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knowledge.” Giorgio Agamben, *What is an Apparatus and Other Essays*, Stanford, 2009, 2-3, emphasis mine.

histories have defined Bengal only in terms of its permanently-settled areas, thereby excluding those vast tracts within it which were temporarily-settled. Consequently, their conclusions about Bengal's agrarian development have been skewed.<sup>9</sup>

However, as this dissertation bears out, in the organization of its agrarian territory, Cuttack received a distinct kind of governmental attention. Right from the beginning it was set up as an anomalous zone. In spite of being a part of the Bengal Presidency, a permanent zemindary settlement—the framework within which revenue was collected in the greater part of this presidency—was never introduced in Cuttack. During the initial years, settlements spanning brief periods, like one, three, or five years, were made with zemindars. Very soon, in the aftermath of an insurgency led by a group of Paiks—the erstwhile private militia of the descendant of the putative ancient sovereign of Orissa, the Raja of Khurda—in 1817, changes were introduced in the nature of land settlement in several areas of Cuttack. More significant changes were introduced over the years 1837-45 when an extensive survey and settlement operation was launched in Cuttack, which fixed rents and classified proprietary titles to lands. Most importantly, throughout the first half of the nineteenth century an intense debate went on at various levels of the imperial bureaucracy regarding the distinctiveness of the agrarian conditions of Cuttack. It is in the light of this debate that the Bengal Code, or the regulations pertaining primarily to revenue administration, was perceived as inapplicable to the local conditions of Cuttack.<sup>10</sup>

This dissertation follows lines and circulations that were spun by this debate around a variety of localities, about local particularities of agrarian conditions. I locate Cuttack as various congealed moments in this interconnected field of motion, only to point towards their continuous decomposition and recomposition. I demonstrate how the agrarian conditions in Cuttack could be read as an outcome of a multi-layered, dispersed, and interconstitutive network of knowledge and governance. That Cuttack was important, and that it was not only one of the innumerable localities, if not an obscure one, in British India, but stood for something much greater than itself, that is,

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<sup>9</sup>None of the seminal works on agrarian Bengal consider temporarily-settled areas of the presidency. See Sugata Bose, *Peasant Labor and Colonial Capital: Rural Bengal since 1770*, Cambridge, 1993, Sirajul Islam, *Bengal Land Tenure: The origin and growth of intermediate interests in the 19<sup>th</sup> century*, Rotterdam, 1985, and Ratnalekha Ray, *Change in Bengal Agrarian Society: 1760-1850*, New Delhi, 1979.

<sup>10</sup>See N. R. Patnaik (ed.) *Economic History of Orissa*, New Delhi, 1997, K. M. Patra, *Orissa under the East India Company*, New Delhi, 1971, J. K. Samal, *History of Modern Orissa*, Kolkata, 1989, and T.K. Mukhopadhyay, *The Agrarian Society of Orissa: Nineteenth Century*, Kolkata, 2008.

an important moment in a ceaseless debate over varieties in indigenous agrarian conditions and general principles of agrarian governance, came out in several official enunciations. Perhaps, their pinnacle was reached when Cuttack found an exclusive mention in John Stuart Mill's 'Memorandum of the Improvements In the Administration of India During the Last Thirty Years' presented in 1858 to the British Parliament. Mill argued that Cuttack represented the best system of settlement, which combined the respective advantages of both ryotwari and mahalwari. It was a territory which, despite being in Bengal, was not governed according to Cornwallis's permanent settlement. Yet, Mill argued that it should serve as the leading model of agrarian governance, and proposed its extension to other recently-conquered territories of the Company.<sup>11</sup> Cuttack was simultaneously anomalous and exemplary. This dissertation takes one of its cues from this enunciation to argue, and demonstrate, that just as J.S. Mill was both a Company servant and one of the leading political economists of his time, Cuttack was not only a nodal point in British Indian agrarian governance, it was also a crucial analytical constituent of the epistemological universe of early nineteenth century political economy in Britain. In order to understand the peculiar characterisation of Cuttack in official discourse, it is important to take a look at debates over specificities in the interconnected networks of political economy and agrarian governance. Accordingly, this dissertation begins with a chapter on political economy.

It is widely accepted that with the beginning of the nineteenth century, the theoretical field of political economy in Britain was predominantly defined in terms of David Ricardo's system. Historians have, however, qualified the extent of the intellectual authority of Ricardian principles within political economy circles. Ricardian principles were critiqued within political economy from different perspectives. One of the major strands of this internal critique was articulated by a group identified by Boyd Hilton as the "Christian economists", who "...assailed what they took to be its dominant, anti-landlord, anti-clerical, and viciously secular formulation by Ricardo and the *Westminster Review* radicals."<sup>12</sup> There are two other

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<sup>11</sup>John Stuart Mill, "Memorandum of the Improvements In the Administration of India During the Last Thirty Years" (1858), in *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill, XXX—Writings on India*, ed. J.M. Robson, M. Moir, and Z. Moir, Toronto, 1990, 127-28.

<sup>12</sup>Boyd Hilton, *The Age of Atonement: The Influence of Evangelicalism on Social and Economic Thought, 1785-1865*, Oxford, 1988, 37. In a similar vein, Harro Maas argues that political economists, like William Whewell and Richard Jones in Cambridge, and Richard Whately in Oxford, critiqued Ricardianism from perspectives deeply rooted in natural theology. Harro Maas, "A Hard Battle to



extreme assessments of the impact of Ricardo's ideas in contemporary Britain. One of them is put forward by Keynes who argues that, "Ricardo conquered England as completely as the Holy inquisition conquered Spain."<sup>13</sup> In radical opposition to this view, Schumpeter holds that, "...the Ricardians were always in the minority, even in England, and it is only Ricardo's personal force which, as we look back, creates the impression that his teaching...dominated the thought of the time....The opposite is nearer the truth."<sup>14</sup> Mark Blaug reinterprets both positions by stating that in the process of the popularization of Ricardo's views, carried out by his ardent devotees, his ideas underwent substantial modification. He notes that, "...as Ricardian economics was disseminated, the Ricardianism which conquered England would probably not have received Ricardo's personal endorsement. A series of amendments and defences thrown up against criticism soon covered and in the end almost buried the original doctrine."<sup>15</sup>

In the context of British India, however, the singularity of the authority of Ricardo's doctrines have been taken for granted in the historiography since Eric Stokes's pioneering work, especially so because Stokes identifies Ricardianism as the core of Utilitarianism.<sup>16</sup> He argues that Ricardo's close friend and the scholar-administrator James Mill was the critical conduit, through which Ricardian political economy made its way to the agrarian affairs of British India.<sup>17</sup> It is through agrarian governance, therefore, according to Stokes, that the authoritarian, universal, reforming impulse of western liberal principles, specifically its utilitarian avatar, made its most forceful mark on an indigenous society. In contrast to interventionist liberalism, Stokes argues, stood a preservationist tradition, "the 'Romantic' generation in British Indian history".<sup>18</sup> This tradition approached Indian/indigenous society with a sentiment "with which Wordsworth and the Romantics invested the noble peasant".<sup>19</sup> Stokes remarks that "They brought to the Indian problem Burke's notion of history...The Bengal system they saw as the denial of this touchstone of history and

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Fight': Natural Theology and the Dismal Science, 1820-50", *History of Political Economy*, 40, 5, 2008, 143-67.

<sup>13</sup>Cited in Mark Blaug, *Ricardian Economics: A Historical Study*, New Haven, 1958, 1.

<sup>14</sup>Cited in Ibid, 2.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid, 1.

<sup>16</sup>Eric Stokes, *The English Utilitarians and India*, Delhi, 1989, 81.

<sup>17</sup>As Stokes notes, in the hands of Mill, "The law of rent provided...both a coherent policy for the demarcation of public and private rights in the land, and a clear criterion of assessment." Ibid, 92.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid, 15.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid.

experience...’’<sup>20</sup> Thus, for Stokes, even though this entry-point into agrarian governance in British India was different from, and opposed to, the utilitarian/liberal one, it still was identified as originating from a metropolitan philosophical imperative.<sup>21</sup>

Stokes’s characterization of the philosophical basis of governance—not only agrarian, but in general—in nineteenth century British India in terms of a division between the utilitarians/liberals and the romantics/conservatives has been repeated later.<sup>22</sup> Lynn Zastoupil, for example, critiques the absence in Stokes’s work of any consideration of John Stuart Mill’s entanglement with British India. He fills up this gap by providing a rich discussion of the influence the younger Mill exerted in formulating policies in various areas of governance in British India.<sup>23</sup> In narrating this involvement, Zastoupil understands J.S. Mill’s philosophical outlook as composed of a mixture of the course of his intellectual development as a thinker, and that of his experience at the India House as an administrator. Accordingly, he interprets Mill’s philosophy as a reinterpretation of the senior Mill’s abstract authoritarian universalism in the light of an appreciation of historical and cultural specificities. This reworking, Zastoupil argues, emerged out of the simultaneous impact on Mill of the romantic sensibilities of his time and the ideas of the “empire of opinion” group of British Indian administrators, who espoused a Burkean sensitivity towards indigenous life.<sup>24</sup> It is important to point out here that Zastoupil’s “empire of opinion” group consisted exactly of those administrators who, in Stokes’s work, were categorized as

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<sup>20</sup>Ibid.

<sup>21</sup>For a different perspective on Burke which analyzes his emphasis on cultural and historical specificity as the mark of a philosophy tolerant and appreciative of difference, in contrast to the exclusivist, aggressive universalism of thinkers commonly viewed as liberals, like the Mills, and thereby more genuinely liberal than the latter, see Uday Singh Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire: A Study in Nineteenth-Century British Liberal Thought*, Chicago, 1999. Another work which investigates the “imperial” dimension in the thought of major eighteenth and nineteenth century British and French thinkers is Jennifer Pitts, *A Turn to Empire: The Rise of Imperial Liberalism in Britain and France*, Princeton, 2005.

<sup>22</sup>David Arnold provides an important critique of the binary between a reforming, improving utilitarianism and a preserving romanticism. He argues that the romantic imagination acted as a complimentary vision to the utilitarian ideologies of “improvement”. Although the romantic strain in colonial imaginations of landscape adored nostalgia and cried out loud for the lost glory of a golden past and a return to the primitive state of nature, its ideal of a perfect communion of man with nature was couched entirely in terms of a vision of agriculture which would create order out of a chaotic and disarranged nature by techniques of “improvement”. See David Arnold, *The Tropics and The Traveling Gaze: India, Landscape, and Science, 1800-1856*, New Delhi, 2005, 74-109. For a similar critique, see Neeladri Bhattacharya, “Pastoralists in a Colonial World”, in *Nature, Culture, Imperialism: Essays on the Environmental History of South Asia* ed. David Arnold and Ramachandra Guha, Delhi, 1985, 49-86.

<sup>23</sup>Lynn Zastoupil, *John Stuart Mill and India*, Stanford, 1994, 3.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid, 182.

the “Romantic generation”. Although he insists that Mill’s enunciations not only reflected engagements with varied strands of metropolitan thought, but were also shaped by the imperial experience of administration through the ideas of the “empire of opinion” group, in reading these latter ideas in turn as Burkean and Whiggish articulations, Zastoupil ends up rewriting the “imperial” mind of J.S. Mill as a metropolitan one. In an attempt to explain Mill’s philosophy in terms of an imperial intercourse, he ends up reproducing Stokes’s analytical framework. The diffusionist model is retained, along with a series of binaries, like metropole-colony, western liberal theory-indigenous reality, abstract utilitarian universalism-concrete romantic particularism, whig-liberal, inside-outside, and many others. Keeping in mind these historiographical trends, the very epistemological conditions of possibility of a relation between political economy in Britain and agrarian governance in British India in the first half of the nineteenth century is tackled in the second chapter of the dissertation. In the process, I demonstrate my difference from both the line of argument set up by Stokes, as well as its critiques.

### **Transformed Categories**

In the second chapter, I provide a different reading of political economy in Britain, by examining a range of debates in the first half of the nineteenth century over the methodology of political economy. While different positions in these debates remained embedded in the Ricardian framework, still there was a transformation in the meanings of Ricardian categories. In this chapter, I argue that these changed meanings, of the dominant categories of political economy, like production, distribution, labor, rent, profit, wages and others, effected a more general reinterpretation of the epistemological object of political economy. I trace this transformation over the writings of Thomas Malthus, David Ricardo, J. R. McCulloch, William Whewell, James Mill and Richard Jones. Major contentions emerged amongst them over the methodology appropriate to this mode of developing knowledge about human societies. I identify various positions, in terms of their differences from each other, while at the same time delineating, within these positions only, a shared direction of movement towards a general epistemological redefinition.

The debates arose when Richard Jones and William Whewell critiqued Ricardo’s formulation of political economy as comprising of false generalizations.

They argued that the manner in which Ricardo defined the chief constituent categories of his system made them inapplicable to, even meaningless for, the vast majority of the peoples living in different nations of the world. Jones and Whewell termed Ricardo's methodology as deductive, constituted by a form of reasoning which defined categories on the basis of sweeping a priori generalizations about production and distribution of wealth in human societies. As against this, they claimed that an inductive methodology must be followed in building up knowledge in all forms of sciences. Along with John Herschel, and Charles Babbage, Richard Jones and William Whewell formed an academic circle when they were students in Cambridge, which tried to programmatically develop an inductive methodology as the epistemological ground of all branches of science. Whewell emerged as the intellectual centre of this movement.<sup>25</sup> Whewell's efforts were directed towards a systematic exposition of the nature of true knowledge. True knowledge, he argued, can be obtained only by a process of "collecting general truths from observed facts, which process is termed *Induction*."<sup>26</sup> He noted that while successive generalizations and the progressive truths corresponding to them can be traced through the evolution of the physical sciences, such truths have not yet been established in the domains of other sciences, like political economy, philology, morals, or fine art.<sup>27</sup> But he believed that hereafter it will be possible to show that these sciences are governed by the same laws of inductive knowledge as that of the physical sciences.

It is in the spirit of this emphasis on observed facts that Richard Jones articulated his critique of the Ricardian system. Jones announced the project of an inductive political economy with a sharp attack on Ricardian categories: "Mr. Ricardo...produced a system very ingeniously combined, of purely hypothetical truths; which, however, a single comprehensive glance at the world as it actually exists, is sufficient to show to be utterly inconsistent with the past and present condition of mankind."<sup>28</sup> In this chapter, I elaborate upon Jones's formulation of political economy, and its differences from the Ricardian system. I do not, however,

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<sup>25</sup>See Laura Snyder, *The Philosophical Breakfast Club*, New York, 2011, and Richard Yeo, *Defining Science: William Whewell, natural knowledge and public debate in early Victorian Britain*, Cambridge, 1993, pp 3-27.

<sup>26</sup>William Whewell, *The Philosophy of the Inductive Sciences, founded upon their history*, Vol. 1, London, 1840, 4.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid, 9.

<sup>28</sup>Richard Jones, *An Essay on the Distribution of Wealth and on the Sources of Taxation*, London, 1831, vii.

project the Ricardo-Jones, or the deductive-inductive opposition as the cardinal principle of this difference. I document how these apparently opposed positions shared similar epistemological ambitions. But at the same time, I argue, there was a transformation of Ricardo's categories, which took place at an analytical level different from the self-stylized positions of the participants in these debates. That is why this transformation was evident even in a devout Ricardian, like James Mill, or in the language of Thomas Malthus, with whom Ricardo shared many of his theoretical premises. This chapter both accepts and denies the claims of difference the various positions articulate, by tracing certain invisible lines of consensus to indicate a shift at a semantic level different from the visible one.

The opposition between a priori generalizations and observed facts was translated in these debates as that between theory and practice. It is from this vantage point that Malthus criticized Ricardo's conclusions as inapplicable to practical conditions of the world. Rising rents, Malthus argued against Ricardo, did not necessarily indicate a push towards the margins of cultivation. Practically, rents were found to increase due to agricultural improvements, out of an increase in the total produce. In this chapter, I argue that Malthus's differences with Ricardo over theoretical and practical forms of political economic categories ultimately stemmed from their different perspectives on value. Thus, although the point of difference was staged as that between theory and practice, they reflected different theoretical positions on value.<sup>29</sup>

The quarrel between theory and practice took firm root in the contestations over the epistemological status of political economy after the publication of Jones's book. Following the reviews of Jones's book—both positive, by Whewell and negative, by McCulloch—I argue that each position, despite opposing theory to practice, claimed greater universality over the other. The program of induction had a totalizing ambition. It wanted to develop a theoretical framework capable of explaining the innumerable and strikingly different particularities of the world. It had

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<sup>29</sup>Malthus invested value in land in a manner which was contrary to Ricardo's labor-centric theory of value. Several scholars have identified this as an "agrarian bias" in Malthus. See Donald Winch, *Malthus*, Oxford & New York, 1987, Blaug, *Ricardian Economics*, 80, and David Cannadine, "Conspicuous Consumption by the Landed Classes, 1790-1830" in *Malthus and His Time*, ed. Michael Turner, London, 1986, 96-111.

the ambition of a super-synoptic eye, which, in one compact look, would be able to introduce an integrated meaning into the bewildering variety of the world.<sup>30</sup>

McCulloch carved out a selective domain of universality for Ricardian principles. In contrast to this, James Mill devised a greater universality for Ricardian political economy by interpreting the conditions under which land was held in British India in the light of Ricardian categories. Stokes correctly notes that this application of Ricardian ideas crucially determined both the standard of assessment, and the classification of proprietary rights in British India. But he fails to understand the crucial reinterpretation that Ricardo's political economy underwent in the process of informing agrarian governance in British India. The context of this reinterpretation, as this chapter shows, was a battle for greater universality of political economic categories. What Stokes also overlooks is Mill's presentation of this reinterpreted Ricardianism as the authentic indigenous framework of property rights and revenue policy. Although James Mill used Ricardian definitions in explaining the relationship between property and land-tax in India, he argued that his articulations were rooted in the ancient, historically continuous, autochthonous regime of property in India and the form of taxation based on it. I argue that Mill's reinterpretations, albeit unknowingly, contributed crucially to the epistemological refashioning of Ricardian political economy.

Richard Jones's work went further in rewriting political economy in the light of the indigenous conditions of different nations in the world. Jones argued that rents, wages, and profits are determined by the variety of conditions under which production and distribution take place all over the world. He emphasised that agricultural production, or the very act of labouring on land, was always-already grounded in multifarious frameworks of the distribution of produce. These conditions of distribution, in turn, were historical outcomes of complex and multilayered entanglements between property and political power. Jones elucidated his perspective by highlighting the various kinds of rents existing in different nations, explaining them as emerging out of varying relations of power between proprietors of different kinds. Even James Mill argues that the relationship between property and political

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<sup>30</sup>Mary Poovey, despite examining the inductivist intervention in the debates over formulation of objective knowledge in nineteenth century Britain, fails to identify its universalizing aspirations, and its underlying similarities with the a priori perspective of which it claimed to be a critique. See Mary Poovey, *A History of the Modern Fact: Problems of Knowledge in the Sciences of Wealth and Society*, Chicago and London, 1998.

power determined the chief constituents of political economy, namely, production and distribution. But Mill ultimately reproduced Ricardian classifications in devising a political economy for “indigenous” conditions. He retained a definition of rent, which was naturalistic, but more importantly, premised on the Ricardian segregation of the domain of distribution in India into the landlord-state, and the farmer-cultivator ryot. Jones, on the contrary, construed the domain of distribution in India as a more diffused ensemble of proprietary and political power, constituted by the state, the zamindars, the ryots, the village-headmen, and the village. In this scheme, the proprietary field, which was also the political field, was seen as made up of a variety of relations, rights, and capacities. Rent was understood as a crucial transaction between these actors, which defined the contours of this field of power.<sup>31</sup>

This was the moment of transformation of Ricardian political economy. With Richard Jones, the epistemological object of political economy was redefined as the “political”. Political economy was no longer viewed as naturally divisible into the universal compartments of production and distribution. Rather, these compartments were seen as conditioned by complex constellations of property and political power. Accordingly, all the categorial constituents of these domains, namely, rent, wage, profit, and most importantly, labor itself, was framed by the “political” as contingent on power. This remapping of political economy in the second chapter sets up tracks for forays into agrarian governance in British India in the subsequent chapters. It also

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<sup>31</sup>Richard Jones’s location in contemporary political economy has not been adequately conceptualised. In the light of disciplinary traditions of economics, he has been classified as a historical/institutionalist economist. See Salim Rashid, “Richard Jones and Baconian Historicism at Cambridge”, *Journal of Economic Issues*, 13, 1, 1979, 159-73, and William L. Miller, “Richard Jones’s contribution to the theory of rent”, *History of Political Economy*, 9, 1977, 346-65. References to him are scanty in the histories of British India. It is only from a revised position in his later work that Stokes argues that Jones’s theory of peasant rents had a brief and temporary influence on agrarian governance, which was eventually swept away by the persistence of the Ricardian framework. See Eric Stokes, *The Peasant and the Raj: Studies in agrarian society and peasant rebellion in colonial India*, Cambridge, 1978, 94-7. Chris Bayly, along a similar line, notes that Jones’s theory had a minor impact, as it made officials in the North-Western Provinces reduce the rent burden on the cultivators. See C.A. Bayly, *The New Cambridge History of India, II.1: Indian Society and the Making of the British Empire*, Cambridge, 1988, 129. More specifically, regarding debates over rent during the tenancy legislation in late nineteenth century Bengal, Peter Robb observes that Richard Jones’s analysis of the category influenced some reformers. He notes that these reformers rejected the Ricardian-Malthusian definition of rent rooted in market competition and natural fertility, arguing, following Jones, that rent emerged out of power. See Peter Robb, *Ancient Rights and Future Comfort: Bihar, the Bengal Tenancy Act of 1885 and British Rule in India*, London, 1997, 197. The only person to devote substantial conceptual attention to Jones is William Barber. But even he analyses Jones’s work in terms of its self-styled inductivism, arguing that Jones, intuitively, had a more realistic understanding of Indian society. Moreover, like other works, he also concludes that Jones’s ideas had almost no relevance for agrarian governance in British India. See William J. Barber, *British Economic Thought and India 1600-1858: A Study in the History of Development Economics*, Oxford, 1975, 194-210.

establishes the line of critique central to this dissertation. It destabilizes the series of interchangeable binary oppositions which have constituted the analytic of most works of South Asian agrarian history. The division between abstract political economy and concrete indigenous reality is invalidated as I show how the indigenous was *internal* to the discourse of political economy in early nineteenth century Britain. The emphasis on historical specificity which Stokes and others associate with the preservationist, romantic-conservative sensibilities, as opposed to the interventionist utilitarian liberalism, is critiqued by this interpretive move. I argue that history, indigeneity, specificity, and preservation, were not opposed to the universality of political economic categories. On the contrary, they were constitutive of its universality. Although Ricardian political economy was critiqued by Jones, its structure was never abandoned. Rather, specificity, history, and indigeneity were those elements in the totalizing program of inductivism, which invested the constituents of classical political economy, like production, distribution, rent, wage, profit, and labor with an unprecedented form of universality.

### **The Meaning of Production**

This dissertation argues that the critique of Ricardianism was not, however, a simple replacement of one universal by another. At this point, I turn towards an engagement with Foucault's characterisation of political economy as a domain of knowledge in the modern episteme. Foucault argues that the shift in the structure of discourse from the Classical to the Modern episteme was marked by a change from representation to its limits. As he demonstrates, by the end of the eighteenth century, a new discursive constellation emerged, constituted by an interconnected, shared analytic of producing knowledge about life, labor and language, congealing around the disciplines of biology, philology, and political economy respectively.

Within this new episteme, labor, as production, emerged as the organizing epistemological framework of political economy. The manner in which the category of labor-as-production was formulated in political economy, from the time of Adam Smith, and especially with Ricardo, Foucault notes, reveals changes at a deeper level



of thought.<sup>32</sup> Henceforth, the mode of being of things was no longer considered as representable. They could not be horizontally distributed over a table of equivalence in terms of identities and differences. Rather “they turn in upon themselves, posit their own volumes, and define for themselves an internal space which, to our representation, is on the exterior... The very being of that which is represented is now going to fall outside representation itself.”<sup>33</sup> It is this archaeological shift which determined a move away from exchange as the basis of analysis of wealth to labor as the condition of possibility of all exchange. In the Classical episteme value was defined as representation of the equivalence of all objects established through exchange. In the Modern episteme, value was seen as rooted in a deep, primordial, organic force, beyond and beneath representation—in the activity of labor. Accordingly, production displaced circulation, in becoming the foundational principle of political economy. All constituents of the process of production were seen as ultimately reducible to units of labor, applied at different moments of time.<sup>34</sup> In Ricardo’s system, production was invested with a historicity, which was the continuous historical time of the application of successive units of labor.<sup>35</sup>

This dissertation both agrees and disagrees with Foucault’s analysis of political economy. I concur with the argument that Ricardo’s framework was constitutive of the continuous temporality of production. Even Jones, despite overwriting production with concatenations of property and political power, retained its analytical importance in a certain sense, by arguing that each specific arrangement of the “political” conditioned the productive efficiency of labor differently. He also implied, without emphasizing, that the different circumstances of labouring were plotted within a

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<sup>32</sup>Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, New York, 1994 (1970), 237. Keith Tribe carries out a Foucaultian treatment of early nineteenth century classical political economy, arguing that, “at the beginning of the nineteenth century, a novel discursive formation came into being, one whose structure is constituted by a specific conjunction of concepts of capital, profit, exchange, production and distribution. This event marks the birth of economic discourse.” See Keith Tribe, *Land, Labour and Economic Discourse*, London, 1978, 5. In his doctoral dissertation Tribe put forwards a critique of the universal assumptions immanent to the conceptualization of agrarian production in Ricardian political economy, based on his analysis of the centrality of the category of rent in it. He argues that it “is the radical a-historicity of Ricardian economics, which establishes the primacy of agrarian capitalism at the cost of an inability to establish a concept of the different systems of production and the distinct relations of production that they set to work.” Keith Tribe, *Ground Rent and the Formation of Classical Political Economy: A Theoretical History*, PhD dissertation, University of Cambridge, 1976, 239.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid, 239.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid, 254.

<sup>35</sup>Foucault points out that “The mode of being of economics is no longer linked to a simultaneous space of difference and identities, but to the time of successive productions.” Ibid, 255.

hierarchy, with the conditions of capitalist agriculture representing their most advanced form. But I argue that, ultimately, through the foregrounding of the “political”, there was a significant transformation in the epistemological orientation of political economy. Production remained important, but only as the “political”, which, as I show in the later chapters, had crucial consequences for agrarian governance, and the consolidation of agrarian power in a variety of localities in British India. I argue that the “political” effectuated a critical change in the meaning of production. It reorganized production as a heterogeneous field of power, emanating from the varying interrelations between property and political power in different nations of the world.

A hermeneutic impulse informs this emphasis on reconstructing the meaning of production out of the discourse of political economy in early nineteenth century Britain. This exercise, however, differs from what Quentin Skinner proposes as the correct method of interpreting texts. Skinner argues that in order to understand a particular text, “we must be able to give an account not merely of the meaning of what was said, but also of what the writer in question may have meant by saying what was said.”<sup>36</sup> In reading utterances in terms of “illocutionary intentions”, he identifies an internally rational, intending subject as the author of meaning. This dissertation critiques such subjectivism, by pointing out that meanings are formed as part of an apparatus. They stabilize in certain locations, only to get transformed in others.

Skinner raises another question, which is critical for my reading of political economy. He asks, “Can we ascribe to past thinkers concepts they had no linguistic mean to express?”<sup>37</sup> As it will be evident in the chapters, nowhere in the contestations is there a self-conscious recognition of the “political” as the transformed epistemological foundation of political economy. Skinner argues that coherence should not be the concern of historians trying to understand meanings in the texts of past thinkers. But this dissertation is all about coherence. It establishes various kinds of coherence from political economy in Britain to the agrarian conflicts of Cuttack by weaving them together, through points of refashioning, into a single analytical space. Contrary to Skinner, it puts great emphasis on coherence. It agrees, to a great extent, with Mark Bevir, a critic of Skinner, who argues that “the reconstruction of a coherent set of beliefs is in part a philosophical task because it relies on the identification of

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<sup>36</sup>Quentin Skinner, *Visions of Politics, Volume I: Regarding Method*, Cambridge, 2002, 79.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid, 49.

intelligible connections between the beliefs concerned. Historians of ideas analyze the relationships that bind concepts together...”<sup>38</sup> However, I disagree with Bevir’s concept of “belief” which retains a subjectivism, arguing that coherence can be identified in and through the beliefs of particular individuals.<sup>39</sup> Instead, I use the concepts of the “political”, and later, that of the “local”, as formed out of complex inter-constitutions. In doing this I follow Bartleson, who, borrowing from Deleuze and Guattari, argues that a concept is always produced out of constituents of other concepts. Thus, “concepts have no intrinsic meaning but draw together multiple components from other concepts and furnish them with meaning. Yet every concept is autonomous, since it renders components from other concepts inseparable within itself...”<sup>40</sup>

### **Localities and the ‘local’: The foundations of agrarian power in British India**

Over the third, fourth, fifth, and sixth chapters, I examine practices of agrarian governance in British India. The third chapter traces the production of the category of rent through these practices in various localities, including Cuttack. Specificities, as “local” conditions, were construed in practices of governance as a hierarchized gradation of property-rights distributed over different localities in British India. Rent was used as a historical clue to determine, and assemble, these proprietary conditions. This, I argue, inaugurated the “political” in British Indian agrarian governance. Moving away from the Ricardian definition of rent, as the measure of differences in soil-fertility, rent was staged as a transaction, which brought out various combinations of property and political power in different localities in British India. This chapter further tracks the career of rent, in the aftermath of the permanent settlement of Bengal, over several sites of governance. It shows how John Herbert Harrington reinterpreted the proprietary provisions of the permanent settlement, in the light of

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<sup>38</sup>Mark Bevir, “Mind and Method in the History of Ideas”, *History and Theory*, 36, 2, 1997, 186. For a similar argument in favor of reading coherence in the texts of the past, see Gad Prudovsky, “Can we Ascribe to Past Thinkers Concepts They had no Linguistic Means to Express”, *History and Theory*, 36, 1, 1997, 15-31.

<sup>39</sup>In the same essay, Bevir argues that, “Equally, however, the reconstruction of coherent set of beliefs is a historical task because particular individuals really did hold these sets of belief at some time in the past.” Bevir, “Mind and Method”, 186. See also Mark Bevir, “Rethinking governmentality: Towards genealogies of governance”, *European Journal of Social Theory*, 13, 4, 2010, 423-41.

<sup>40</sup>Jens Bartleson, *The Critique of the State*, Cambridge, 2001, 24.

rent as the chief vehicle of power in agrarian territories. It further argues that there were attempts to identify rent in Ricardian terms by an investigation of the productive capacities of fields in the North Western Provinces, which witnessed a detailed settlement in the early decades of the nineteenth century. These attempts were, however, quickly abandoned. The chapter traces through the writings of influential administrators like Mackenzie, Bird, and the Governor-General Bentinck, how rent got defined, time and again, as the key vehicle of power in agrarian societies.

The chapter also examines practices of settlement in Cuttack over the years 1836-45. It argues that despite a few attempts to ground rent in differential soil fertility, generally it was seen as a regulator of political power. Accordingly, it was fixed by granting proprietary privileges to village leaders and hereditary cultivators. The course of the “political” is rounded up by yet another text on rent, where rent was defined as that transaction of power which shaped the productive possibilities of labor in a locality. In this chapter, therefore, I demonstrate how rent operated in agrarian governance as a crucial articulation of the political economic discourse of production from within the analytic of the “political”, which set up proprietary power-relations between the state and landholders of various descriptions as the constitutive conditions of production.

The fourth chapter enters into a comprehensive examination of this distributed field of proprietary power. It begins with the “5<sup>th</sup> Report of the Select Committee of East India Affairs”, presented to the British Parliament in 1812, arguing that this report was the first structured presentation of the topography of the “political”. This chapter demonstrates how the “political”, in finding its way to the by-lanes of agrarian governance in British India, got transformed in meaning as the “local”. The framing principle of the “local” was a putative ancient Hindu India which was also the original site of the indigenous “political”. It was defined by a direct proprietary relation between the state and the peasant cultivator, which was believed to have been distorted, obfuscated, or lost over time. With time, other landholders emerged in between these two primary constituents of the “political”, displacing their unmediated intercourse. Accordingly, by the “local” was meant a hierarchized gradation of localities, constituted by specific arrangements of power, between the state, the big landlords, the village leaders, the peasant cultivators, and the village itself. It was construed in such a manner that it could act both as a range and as a point.

The differences between localities were envisioned by governance as the outcomes of different spatio-temporal interconstitutivities. Different kinds of landholders in every locality were understood in terms of their connections with the original form of the proprietary cultivator. They were considered as absent presences, as transformed representatives of a lost origin. Their claims to proprietary privileges were accordingly adjudged on the basis of the authenticity of the marks of the past they exhibited in the present. Through this interpretive grid, localities emerged simultaneously as traces of lost times and lost spaces. One kind of landholder was fixed as the authentic proprietary figure in each locality. Others were not completely displaced. They were granted positions depending on the degree of authenticity they could evince. The selection took place over circulating practices of governance, which continuously drew upon other localities in order to justify a specific selection in a specific locality. In this manner, the “local”, as the reconfigured articulation of the “political”, was established as the object of agrarian governance in British India over the first half of the nineteenth century.

Determining the prospects of production, or agricultural “improvement”, I argue, was also one of the major aims of these practices. This was also an effort to select a prospective improver. The “political” was not the only political-economic principle which, in a refashioned manner, informed the “local”. The “local” was equally grounded in a preference of peasant-proprietors over big landlords, as ideal agricultural improvers, which was another critical stand of the discourse of political economy in early nineteenth century Britain. Clive Dewey observes a resurgence of the peasant-cultivator in the debates over agricultural improvement in nineteenth century Britain. Dewey puts together an entire tradition in political economy, consisting of William Thornton, Richard Jones, J.S. Mill, and Alfred Marshall, championing the cause of the peasant-proprietor.<sup>41</sup> This chapter disagrees slightly with this grouping. Although Richard Jones developed an elaborate classification of peasant rents, he never argued that the peasant proprietor was a superior improver.<sup>42</sup> While discussing the Company’s revenue policy, as part of his political economy of

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<sup>41</sup>Clive J. Dewey, “The rehabilitation of the peasant proprietor in nineteenth-century economic thought”, *History of Political Economy* 6, 1974, 22.

<sup>42</sup>On the contrary, as David Martin’s essay suggests, he was critical of their improving capacities. Martin notes that the Prussian historian Frederick von Raumer “...called on Richard Jones at Haileybury, where he tried, without success, to shake the English economist’s criticism of small farmers.” David Martin, “The rehabilitation of the peasant proprietor in nineteenth-century economic thought: a comment”, *History of Political Economy*, 8, 2, 1976, 300.

indigeneity, he only noted that the rent burden on the cultivators should be lightened in order to improve production. Most importantly, the move away from big landlords in practices of agrarian governance in British India did not signify a straightforward translation of the categories of this discourse. As this chapter shows, none of the figures who were selected as the chief proprietors of a locality, or its potential improver—the “village-zemindars”, or the proprietary-ryot grounded in the putteedaree tenure, or the mukaddams and surburakars of Cuttack—reproduced the figure of the farmer-like peasant-proprietor of the discourse of political economy. The figure of the improving peasant-farmer of the continent was significantly transformed by the discourse of the “local”, and recast in terms of the authentic indigenous “political”.

This chapter ends with John Stuart Mill. It argues that even the younger Mill’s political economy moved away from the classical Ricardian frame. Here also, the epistemological object of political economy was refashioned as the “political”, but in a manner different from Jones. The relationship between Mill’s political economy, and British India is generally summarised as an influence on British Indian revenue policy of Mill’s exaltation of the peasant-proprietor. It is argued that the shift of focus in agrarian governance, from big landlords to peasant-proprietors, reflected this influence. In some works, this argument is further grounded in an imperial context of Mill’s engagement with the Irish land question along similar lines.<sup>43</sup> But these works, as I have argued about Zastoupil, thrive on the imperial-local binary. Cook problematizes the Britain-India, empire-colony model by introducing Ireland to the field of exchange. He argues that this field was shaped by multilateral circuits.<sup>44</sup> But he retains the metropole-colony distinction, in identifying clear pathways of influence from one to another.<sup>45</sup> I analyze Mill’s entanglements with India, by contextualizing

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<sup>43</sup>See Abram L. Harris, “John Stuart Mill: Servant of the East India Company”, *The Canadian Journal of Economic and Political Science*, 30, 2, May 1964, 185-202, and R.D.C. Black, “Economic Policy in Ireland and India in the Time of J.S. Mill”, *The Economic History Review*, n.s., 21, 2, Aug. 1968, 321-336, and S.B. Cook, *Imperial Affinities: Nineteenth Century Analogies and Exchanges between India and Ireland*, New Delhi, 1993.

<sup>44</sup>“Far from simply serving as a conduit for direct one-way transfers from suzerain to possession, the empire was a community of units that related to each other in different ways alternatively as transmitters, mediators and receivers of policy and opinion.” Cook, *Imperial Affinities*, 18.

<sup>45</sup>Ranajit Guha’s work, which analyses the policy of permanent settlement in Bengal in the light of contemporary debates between physiocratic and mercantilist currents of metropolitan thought, is a path-breaking and pioneering example of a diffusionist perspective on British India. See Ranajit Guha, *A Rule of Property for Bengal: An Essay on the Idea of Permanent Settlement*, Durham and London, 1996, (1963). Robert Travers’s book displays a more recent use of a similar approach which argues that practices of governance in eighteenth century British India were underpinned by contemporary British

his political economy within its own discursive field in Britain, and pursuing its further transformations in the discourse of the “local” in British India. Therefore, what become important in this analysis are the transformations within the apparatus, not the direction of flows between analytically separable points.

J.S. Mill, I argue, forged a critical link between property and production in his political economy. His was the first among the series of treatises entitled “Principles of Political Economy”, published during this period in Britain, which had an entire chapter devoted to the different kinds of proprietary relations in land existing in different parts of the world. Even Mill argued that these relations, as the matrix of the distribution of produce, significantly influenced production. But what defined Mill’s articulation of the “political”, and made it different from Jones’s, was the former’s definition of the category of property. Mill argued that since land was the fundamental source of human sustenance, a collective right of proprietorship was ingrained in it. State ownership of landed property, he maintained, was legitimate, as it represented a general will, or the humankind’s right to this gift of nature and basic source of life. Thus, private ownership of land, he insisted, was only justified if the proprietor was an improver/producer. It is on the basis of this distinctive interrelationship between property, production, and political power, understood as being immanent in land, that Mill refashioned the epistemological object of political economy as the “political”. The championing of the peasant-proprietor, I argue, has to be understood in the light of changing articulations of the “political”, from Jones to Mill. Mill believed that the peasant-cultivator in British India, being a productive, improving agent, was a legitimate proprietor.

Mill’s political economy has not been analyzed in this manner. My reading, as I have noted earlier, follows from a hermeneutic urge to understand the refashioned meanings of certain classical political economic categories, like production and distribution. This attempt goes beyond examining Mill’s difference from the classical framework in terms of its self-conscious articulations. Samuel Hollander and Laura Snyder carry out such an exercise by analyzing Mill’s methodological relationship with the program of induction, as espoused by Whewell. Accordingly, they try to

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political ideas about the “ancient constitution”. See Robert Travers, *Ideology and Empire in Eighteenth-Century India: The British Bengal*, Cambridge, 2007. Some other similar examples of diffusionist approaches are Martha McLaren, *British India and British Scotland, 1780-1830: Career Building, Empire Building and a Scottish School of Thought on Indian Governance*, Ohio, 2001, and Robert Travers, “British India as a Problem in Political Economy: Comparing James Steuart and Adam Smith”, in *Lineages of Empire*, ed. Duncan Kelly, London, 2009.

measure how much each of them was tilted towards inductivism or deductivism, in formulating their own methodologies. While Hollander argues that both incorporated some element of each methodology, Snyder notes that, “In the end...Mill characterized political economy as the geometrical science of his father and Bentham, without successfully uniting the inductive element of the Coleridgian method.”<sup>46</sup> In both works, Mill’s political economy is contextualised in terms of its self-conscious binary of differentiation, namely, inductive-deductive. In this dissertation, however, Mill is re-contextualised in the light of a tradition of transformations within political economy. This makes him simultaneously continuous with, and different from, the framework of the “political”. I argue that by accepting the self-evident inductive-deductive binary as the appropriate level of analysis, the works discussed above fail to capture both the invisibilized consensus between these apparently opposed methodologies—which I analyse as different ambitions of universalism—and the transformations in the universality of the “political”.

The fourth chapter suggests that the village played a crucial role in defining the arena of property and political power in British India. The fifth chapter demonstrates how the village was produced by the practices of agrarian governance as a distinct territorial field of property, power, and production. Even J.S. Mill identified it as the customary domain which organized production by protecting the proprietary status of the peasant-cultivator from the encroaching tendencies of the big landholders. Custom, here, was a category internal to the discourse of political economy, not construed as opposed, and external to it.<sup>47</sup> The village was defined as the most fundamental field of power and unit of governance in India. Its authenticity was once again traced back to an ancient Hindu India. The village was seen as the smallest territorial unit of power, formed by interrelations between different kinds of cultivators, occupational groups, and officers of the state engaged in the supervision of production and collection of revenue. It was argued that over time it degenerated into a hub of corruption and intrigue. Henceforth, practices of agrarian governance,

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<sup>46</sup>See Samuel Hollander, “William Whewell and John Stuart Mill on the Methodology of Political Economy”, *Studies in the History and Philosophy of Science*, 14, 2, 1983, 127-168, and Laura J. Snyder, *Reforming Philosophy: A Victorian Debate on Science and Society*, Chicago and London, 2006, 309.

<sup>47</sup>Andrew Sartori makes a similar argument about the deployment of category of custom in debates over the Bengal Rent Act of 1859. But he traces the political economic articulation of custom, and its linkage to a reinterpretation of “rent”, to a Lockean discourse of property-rights. See Andrew Sartori, “A Liberal Discourse of Custom in Colonial Bengal” *Past and Present*, 212, August 2011, 163-97.



through privileging of village-based proprietary titles, surveys, granting of rent-free lands to occupational groups and officers of the state, organised the village as the quintessential domain of power and production in India, and the primary unit of agrarian governance.

Residence in the village emerged as the basis of classification of cultivators. Cultivators residing in the village were given proprietary benefits. Those residing outside were deprived of these privileges. I argue that a discourse of occupancy played a critical role in the governmental production of the village. It was pivotal to the appreciation of the superior productive capacities of the peasant-proprietor. This was particularly evident in the writings of William Thornton and J.S. Mill. For them, the peasant-proprietor's attachment to his dwelling structured his sense of property and invigorated his productive commitments. In contrast to this, the migratory, dwelling-less agricultural labourer was wasteful, improvident, and unproductive. The meaning of productivity was fashioned by the category of occupancy. This constitutive linkage between productivity and occupancy, I argue, operated in a transformed manner in the production of the village as a major component of the indigenous "political" in British India. The distinction between thanee and pahee ryots, and their further differentiation from the agricultural labourer were built upon a discourse of occupancy. As the chapter shows, occupancy functioned as the determinant of authenticity of titles and testimonies as well in establishing the governmental contours of the village.

The fifth chapter focuses entirely on Cuttack. It documents a variety of moments when the stability of the "political", as the organizing framework of agrarian power, collapsed, only in order to get reinforced again. Here I examine situations where the government found it difficult to identify proprietors according to its own classificatory categories. I take a close look at governmental strategies of abstraction which tried to recast different kinds of payments around land as rent. In the process, these practices redefined other relations of power into those which fit into the frames of the "political". This chapter also carefully examines the myriad ways in which dominant landholders of Cuttack articulated their identities in terms of governmental categories, in order to overturn older equations of power, and create new relations of hierarchy. I show how the privileging of dominant landholders of the village was immanent in the discourse of the "local", although it posited itself as a move away from big landholders to cultivators in fixing proprietary endowments. It was not a gap

between the “theory” and “practice” of governance. The figure of the proprietary-ryot—central to the discursive practices of agrarian governance—was fashioned in a manner which could never identify it with the actual cultivators of the land. That is why, as this chapter shows, it could be easily used by the dominant landholders of Cuttack, the mukaddams and the surburakars, in establishing their dominance over both subordinate cultivators and erstwhile zamindars. The chapter shows how the “political”, as a transformed discourse of production, got articulated as ceaseless battles over the leadership of a locality. The meaning of production by the end of the first half of the nineteenth century became, therefore, conflict over agrarian power in the locality.

### **The return of the local**

I began with a critique of those works of South Asian agrarian history which use the local as the primary explanatory category. It is time now to take a closer look at the various shades of these arguments. Frykenberg’s work clearly represents their extreme articulation. He argues, along with Nilmani Mukherjee, that Company policies were helpless in the face of the complexity and variety of the traditional Indian social order inhabiting the localities. They contend that, the ryotwari in Southern India, despite upholding the individual ryot, failed to remove the hold of the village elites in the localities. They also observe that the village system of settlement was the pre-existing indigenous form in these territories.<sup>48</sup> I disagree with this position by demonstrating that what is uncritically accepted here as “indigeneity”, or the “traditional” Indian social order, represented by the village system, was produced over the first half of the nineteenth century as transformed articulations of political economic categories. In considering them as an objective arena of indigeneity, these works speak in the language of the same discourse which produced them. In Walter

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<sup>48</sup>See Nilmani Mukherjee and Robert Eric Frykenberg, “The Ryotwari System and Social Organization in the Madras Presidency” and R. E. Frykenberg, “Village Strength in South India”, in *Land Control and Social Structure in Indian History*, ed. R. E. Frykenberg, Madison, 1969, 217-26. Neil Charlesworth makes a similar argument in the context of Western India about the persistence of village-elites in spite of the introduction of a ryotwari system of management. He observes that, “*Even under the purest ryotwari arrangements, the Patel had considerable control over the way he allocated the village’s revenue load and reported the best time for the ryots to pay their assessments: he could aid his friends and harm his enemies by manipulating the timing of instalments.*” Neil Charlesworth, *Peasants and Imperial Rule: Agriculture and Agrarian Society in the Bombay Presidency, 1850-1935*, Cambridge, 1985, 24, emphasis mine.

Neale's work, the indigenous is further reified as a coherent "unit of thought", revealing itself as the difference between European and Indian ways of perceiving land. Neale argues that while in the European system of thought land was an "economic" category, associated with productivity, profit, efficiency, in the Indian one, it was a "political" category associated with faction, village power, and local conflict.<sup>49</sup> I argue that it is precisely these interchangeable binary divisions, between "Europe" and "India", "economic" and "political", explicitly posited by Neale as the principles of objectively existing difference, that were produced within an apparatus of political economy and agrarian governance in the nineteenth century. As it is evident, they were further reproduced in a range of agrarian histories in various guises.

The force of indigeneity is also highlighted in the work of Ratnalekha Ray, who argues that the permanent settlement could not fundamentally change the social structure of indigenous society, because the British failed to understand that it was the local, village-level elites, or the jotedars, who wielded power in the agrarian society, rather than the big landlords, or the zemindars.<sup>50</sup> Ray's argument is buttressed by Sirajul Islam who notes that all the legal provisions of the permanent settlement were aimed at two groups, namely, the zemindars and the ryots. But there was a proliferation of village-level groups in Bengal throughout the nineteenth century, described by Islam as "intermediaries", who were the centres of power in Bengal's agrarian society. They relentlessly resisted all attempts of the zemindars' to gain a hold on the agrarian interior. Under pressure, soon the colonial government had to settle for a compromise by recognizing these tenures as legitimate proprietary titles. Islam draws a binary between colonial legality and indigenous social reality, arguing that the former was powerless in the face of the latter. He remarks that, "No statutory power could be more powerful than the social power of the jotedars."<sup>51</sup>

This was the theoretical core of the indigenist thesis in South Asian agrarian historiography. These village-level groups were represented as the substance of the 'social' of India—immutable, unaffected by Company governance.<sup>52</sup> What Islam and Ray do not recognize, because of their uncritical celebration of indigeneity, is that the

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<sup>49</sup>Walter C. Neale, "Land is to Rule", in *Land Control and Social Structure in Indian History*, ed. R. E. Frykenberg, Madison, 1969, 3-16.

<sup>50</sup>Ray, *Change in Bengal Agrarian Society*.

<sup>51</sup>Islam, *Bengal Land Tenure*, 15.

<sup>52</sup>"At the base of the revenue-collecting pyramid stood the bedrock of all social institutions—the village..." Ray, *Change in Bengal Agrarian Society*, 52.

rise of village-level groups in Bengal did not mean a gap between governmental orientations and indigenous social reality. Neither did their acceptance imply an overturning of the former by the latter. These “indigenous” forces were not outside, or opposed to, the governmental rationality.<sup>53</sup> On the contrary, as I have argued, they were central to the way the “local” and the “political” came together in practices of agrarian governance to foreground the village-zemindar as the original proprietor, and the village as the most authentic unit of administration, in regions both inside and outside Bengal.

Agrarian histories upholding this indigenous inside also oppose it to the primary expression of an outside, namely, western political economic theory. They argue that colonial policy worked within a grammar of expediency and pragmatism, articulating itself as various accommodative reactions to the specificities of agrarian localities. Accordingly, they argue that such contingent policies cannot be read in terms of contemporary political-economic discourse. Thomas Metcalfe, for example, observes that in the North Western Provinces, “...The relative scarcity of large landholders...meant that the British had in the long run no option but to deal directly with the village-level zamindars...”<sup>54</sup> What Metcalfe understands as a policy formed out of local exigencies, is demonstrated in this dissertation as constituted by categories of political economy. The choice of village-zemindars by practices of governance as the preferred agent of settlement, as I have argued, was an articulation of a network of meanings created by interrelations between the “local”, the “political”, and the championing of the peasant-proprietor in the discourse of “improvement”. The analytical temptation of the pragmatist thesis does not even escape Stokes, who revises his position in one of his later works, arguing that while colonial policy cannot be “reduced entirely to a near-sighted pragmatism”<sup>55</sup>, “...the last word appeared to lie with *local* society irrespective of *European* intentions and attitudes...”<sup>56</sup> The binary continues, despite revisions. The power of the “local” is reified and reinforced. The resistive capacity of the inside is highlighted by Bernard

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<sup>53</sup>For an argument which emphasises the governmental production of the sphere of the “social”, under colonialism, see David Scott, “Colonial Governmentality”, *Social Text*, 43, 1995, 191-220.

<sup>54</sup>Thomas R. Metcalf, *Land, Landlords, and the British Raj: Northern India in the Nineteenth Century*, Berkeley, 1979, 54. Two other classic examples of this perspective are: J. Rosselli, “Theory and Practice in North India”, *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 8, 2, 1971, 134-63, and Neil Rabinovitch, “System v. Expediency: The Reality of Land Revenue Administration in the Bombay Presidency 1812-1820”, *Modern Asian Studies*, 9, 4, 1975, 529-46.

<sup>55</sup>Stokes, *The Peasant and the Raj*, 9.

<sup>56</sup>*Ibid*, 33, emphasis mine.

Cohn as well in his study of Banaras. He demonstrates that despite losing land in sales due to arrears of revenue, the majority of the old landholders “retained their positions, economically, politically, and socially *within* the local areas in which they had held rights as zemindars.”<sup>57</sup> The new men were merely juridical owners. Being located at a distance from the areas where they gained lands, they were not able to loosen the grip of those landholders who resided in the locality, and, therefore, controlled its lands.

Stokes argues that discourse of governance made a separation between two distinct kinds of proprietary rights to land—a right to revenue collection from the land and a right to the land itself. It was not a case of confusing these two rights as one and the same, as Ratna Ray states, due to a gap between the western theory of absolute private property rights and the indigenous reality of multiple, dispersed, shared rights in land. Stokes nuances this opposition, but only to a certain extent. He maintains that despite this awareness, the British always tried to join these two rights. However, they failed in the long run to incorporate the social reality of a field of dispersed land rights to their empty juridical categories. Thus, he concludes, “The legal description of society failed to fit the economic and sociological.”<sup>58</sup> The binary continues. This thesis critiques this position by showing that the “political” articulated two tendencies simultaneously—of unity and dispersal. The move towards the figure of the cultivating-proprietor in the discourse of governance signified an effort to unite these two rights by planting them in the same figure. However, the other articulation of the “political”, construed the proprietary field of India as a dispersed one, distributed as various kinds of rights—both to revenue and to the land itself—amongst the state, zemindars, village leaders, and cultivators. That is why, this thesis argues, although the cultivating-proprietor was privileged, other players in this dispersed field were never displaced. What Stokes, Ray and others posit as the objective reality of the inside and the outside, I argue, is produced by the discourse, and, therefore, internal to the apparatus itself.

There are works which try to strike a balance. Peter Robb carries out a meticulous examination of rent, custom and other aspects of agrarian governance in nineteenth century Bihar. Arguing, for example, that the conflict between utility and history characterised Bentham’s differences with Blackstone, he makes binaries

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<sup>57</sup>Bernard S. Cohn, “Structural Change in Indian Rural Society 1596-1885” in *Land Control and Social Structure in Indian History*, ed. R. E. Frykenberg, Madison, 1969, 89.

<sup>58</sup>Stokes, *The Peasant and the Raj*, 3.

internal to metropolitan philosophical traditions. He doesn't flatten the sphere of European thought by characterising it as a univocal universality. He notes that specificities and the problem of appropriateness, "producing fierce debate about India's past and India's supposedly inherent qualities",<sup>59</sup> marked the discourse of governance. Robb puts forward an interactive model, arguing that the tenancy debates represented the "peculiar combination of British colonialism....with Indian rural society..."<sup>60</sup> But interaction, like hybridity, or dialogue<sup>61</sup>, is based on a prior analytical isolation, and separation between two pure elements. Robb, thus, preserves established binaries, as some of his statements clearly reveal: "Europe supplied principles and regulations, but India required pragmatism and flexibility."<sup>62</sup>

One of the finer examples of an indigenist reading of agrarian society, based on the pragmatist analytic, can be found in an essay written by David Washbrook. Washbrook argues that contradictory articulations of law played a crucial role in the development of India's agrarian society under British rule. While on one hand the law created provisions for the development of an individualist, market-oriented society, on the other it kept on limiting the same sphere by preserving traditional rights and privileges of communities. He interprets the course of agrarian legislations in the light of this model of the law, as constituted by two-way, contradictory movements. He argues that while the permanent settlement of Bengal aimed at enabling the individual to accumulate capital and wealth through a free operation of the market, subsequent legislations in North and South India qualified these rights by upholding the customary privileges of the tenant, or the village-based corporate groups. In this manner, the early Raj reinforced existing, local, indigenous power-relations.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>59</sup>Peter Robb, *Ancient Rights and Future Comfort*, 7.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid, 102.

<sup>61</sup>Irschick's fine study of South Indian agrarian society has a similar analytic. Irschick insists that the process of reconstruction of this society in the colonial period, involved exchange of ideas and practices, that cannot be categorised as either "western" or "indigenous". He argues that both were so intimately woven into each other, that it is impossible to locate authorship. This work, undoubtedly, travels a significant distance in problematizing the binaries operative in the historiography I discuss. But its use of the concept of "dialogue" implies an analytical separability to begin with. Also, the liberal connotation of the term is not erased, as it conjures an impression of an equal partnership in the production of an agrarian society, which was definitely a terrain of tremendously unequal forces of power. See Eugene F. Irschick, *Dialogue and History: Constructing South India 1795-1895*, Berkeley, 1994.

<sup>62</sup>Robb, *Ancient Rights and Future Comfort*, 10.

<sup>63</sup>Thus, Washbrook observes: "although the state partially drew out of these elements of potential dominance, it neither controlled nor created the context from which they came and in which they remained half-situated. In consequence actual rights to possess and use the land remained part-conditioned by this context and dependent on the customs and norms of the local agrarian community."

This analysis, as it is evident, maintains the western-indigenous, metropolitan-local binary. It fails to realize that restriction of the landlords' rights was not antithetical to intentions of creating a market-based agrarian society, as the "tenants", or "village-zemindars", whose rights were upheld after the permanent settlement, were imagined as substantial peasant-proprietors, better suited than big landlords to promote an agrarian capitalism. Neeladri Bhattacharya makes this insightful critique in a review of agrarian histories of colonial India.<sup>64</sup> I add to this line of critique by pointing out that the indigenous was in any case internal to political economy. Its supposed preservation was, thus, different modes of its production by the varied articulations of the "political" and the "local". The inside-outside binary is, however, reproduced by Neeladri as well, this time as state-society, or even, theory (policy)-practice. Although he argues that there was a dialectical relationship between state policies and social reality, as both changed in the process of negotiating each other, his framework ultimately falls back upon analytically isolable domains of the (indigenous) "social" and its outside.<sup>65</sup>

Jon Wilson's recent work offers an interesting analytical entry-point to the world of governance in early nineteenth century British India. Wilson argues that, breaking off from the customary, affective, local political culture of the eighteenth century, an abstract, universal, specifically utilitarian, modern governance emerged with the beginning of the nineteenth century in colonial Bengal. This new form of governance, however, Wilson argues, did not reflect a confident imperial mind. Rather, it emerged out of anxieties and insecurities of colonial officials, and the correspondent search for certainty in a world perceived as strange and alien. Wilson also notes that this was not a process where ideas flowed from the metropole to the colony, but rather one which contributed to the formation of a political culture in the metropole as well.

Ambivalence did not signify a weak colonial state. On the contrary, as Wilson contends, it was the unconscious basis of power. Nevertheless, since, in Wilson's framework, governance was underpinned by ambivalence, it remained uncertain,

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D.A. Washbrook, "Law, State and Agrarian Society in Colonial India", *Modern Asian Studies*, 15, 3, 1981, 664.

<sup>64</sup>Neeladri Bhattacharya, "Colonial State and Agrarian Society" in *Situating Indian History*, ed. Sabyasachi Bhattacharya and Romila Thapar, Delhi, 1986, 134-5.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid, 113-15. A similar argument about the formation of an agrarian society in South India over processes of negotiation between colonial officials and peasant producers can be found in David Ludden's work. See David Ludden, *Peasant History in South India*, Delhi, 1989.

unstable, and restless, in the face of an intractable real world which kept on escaping its categorizing clutches. This is where, I argue, he returns to the abstract-concrete, representation-reality, inside-outside binaries. It is particularly evident in his analysis of agrarian governance, where he keeps insisting that colonial codes failed to capture the reality of the agrarian interiors. As he notes, “Hidden away in their offices, collectors rarely physically encountered rural social relations. District tours became commonplace by the middle of the nineteenth century. In the 1790s, officers only left their station because of sickness or leave.”<sup>66</sup> Wilson seems to suggest that the very act of physical confinement also signified an imprisonment in the false structures of representation, from where one could break free by tasting the free air of the countryside, the organic reality outside. As this dissertation shows, such an opposition, between inside and outside, code and practice, was part of the discursive vocabulary of political economy and agrarian governance in nineteenth century British India. Wilson speaks in the same language.

Wilson’s is an analytic which suspects writing, finds it less authentic, derivative, representative, superficial, fallen, and unnatural. It assumes that the written word is the facile outside of an organic inside. It belongs to, following Jacques Derrida, “The epoch of the logos”, which “debases writing considered as mediation of mediation and as a fall into the exteriority of meaning.”<sup>67</sup> This dissertation is positioned against all such formulations which believe in a hierarchized binary between a direct, unmediated, essential truth, or the being-as-presence, and its derived, displaced, secondary representation.<sup>68</sup> The binary, which creates an inside and an outside of agrarian affairs of British India, I demonstrate, is all-pervasive. It reappears, in nineteenth century British India as well as in today’s agrarian histories.

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<sup>66</sup>Jon E. Wilson, *The Domination of Strangers: Modern Governance in Eastern India, 1780-1835*, Basingstoke, 2008, 108.

<sup>67</sup>Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, Baltimore, 1976, 12-13.

<sup>68</sup>It is this binary which, as Derrida notes, “has necessarily dominated the history of the world during an entire epoch, and has even produced the idea of the world, the idea of world-origin, that arises from the difference between the worldly and the non-worldly, the outside and the inside, ideality and nonideality, universal and nonuniversal, transcendental and empirical, etc.” Ibid, 8.



## Chapter Two

### The “political” in political economy: inaugurating an analytic

The universal, in fact, explains nothing: it is the universal which needs to be explained.

Gilles Deleuze<sup>1</sup>

It is intended in this dissertation to re-write the agrarian history of early-nineteenth century Cuttack as an apparatus. This chapter opens up one of the lines in that apparatus into which the agrarian conditions of Cuttack were inextricably interwoven. Here I document a key transformation within political economy in early nineteenth-century Britain. I examine debates over the methodology of political economy through the writings of some of the leading practitioners in this field. These contentions, I demonstrate, were structured primarily around the binary of theory and practice. This opposition was posited in the debates as one between abstract and concrete, a priori and observational, universal and particular, deductive and inductive modes of acquiring knowledge about human societies. This chapter argues that despite the visible positions of opposition, there was an invisible analytical space of consensus in them. Overwriting differences, each of these positions worked within a framework of universality. But still, these were articulations of different kinds of universality. In the process of becoming different, categories constituting one kind of universality got transformed into another. Their meanings changed. The chapter, therefore, attempts to achieve two analytical operations. On one hand, it unpacks oppositions by digging out their shared assumptions. On the other, it documents difference by highlighting transformations in meanings of categories, which took place in the process of a critique of, and debates over, universality. While I challenge binaries, I also retain a hermeneutic intent of reconstructing meanings from past statements.

This chapter elaborates upon the argument about the meaning of production stated in the introduction. It argues that the critique of Ricardian categories, posed as a methodological one by the inductivists, namely Richard Jones and William Whewell,

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<sup>1</sup>Gilles Deleuze, “What is a Dispositif?” in *Michel Foucault Philosopher*, ed. Timothy J. Armstrong, New York, 1992, 162.

marked a fundamental transformation in the epistemological object of political economy. This transformation took place as the chief categorial constituents of political economy, production and distribution, were redefined as contingent outcomes of an ensemble of property and political power. In other words, it was argued that the meanings of production and distribution were conditioned by the different interrelations between property and political power in different nations of the world. This was also a moment of localization within the apparatus, a moment of congealing of meaning, which I call the “political”. This reconfiguration did not emerge out only of the critique of Ricardo’s framework. Even in James Mill’s attempted reinterpretation of Ricardian categories, in the context of British India, there was a clear indication of this refashioning of political economy, irrespective of Mill’s explicit acknowledgment of it. Within the framework of the “political”, “production” was seen as conditioned by the field of “distribution”, which was, in turn, construed as an ensemble of property and political power, varying across the world. By this epistemological move, I argue, particularity, indigeneity and local power became key conceptual constituents of political economy. They were no longer considered as opposed to, or outside of the universality of political-economic categories. On the contrary, they became the defining markers of a new kind of universality, of a new programme of totalization. This chapter narrates the process which made the “local” internal to the core of political economy, namely, production.

The category of rent, as I demonstrate, played a formative role in this epistemological refashioning. It was posited as an entry-point to the methodological conflict over theory-practice, abstract-concrete, and deductive-inductive, by all kinds of positions, from Malthus, to James Mill, to Richard Jones. It was identified as the chief emblem of Ricardianism; accordingly, both the proponents and the opponents of the latter devoted a great deal of analytical attention to rent. In this manner, it became one of the sites over which local power was made immanent to political economy. It emerged as one of the building blocks of the “political”.

This reading of rent is also a substantive critique of the relationship Eric Stokes sets up between utilitarianism in Britain and agrarian governance in British India. Stokes argues that, “The core of utilitarian philosophy, its professed scientific foundation, was the new political economy developed by Ricardo. At the heart of Indian administration lay the land revenue system. The one was to react upon the

other with results of deepest importance for Indian society.”<sup>2</sup> He further argues that it was the Ricardian definition of rent which underpinned the land revenue policy of nineteenth century British India. This chapter shows that with the epistemological turn in political economy, the relationship between it and British Indian agrarian governance did not remain restricted to Ricardianism/Utilitarianism. However, even in this changed conceptual context, rent remained a critical marker. This new career of rent, however, was built upon a critique of its Ricardian articulation. Henceforth, rent signified one of those strands of local power which tied together the indigenized analytical vocabulary of political economy.

### **Land: Malthus explains divinity to Ricardo**

This section opens up a varied analytical field within political economy in early nineteenth-century Britain, where methodological conflicts were shaped in complex ways by differences over the category of rent. It led to more fundamental questions regarding the assumptions of Ricardian political economy. It served as an analytical power-house generating significant markers of differentiation within contemporary political economy. This section will highlight the differences between Thomas Malthus’s and David Ricardo’s analytical deployment of rent, which will, in turn, also indicate the different epistemological assumptions underpinning their respective political-economic frames. By outlining the limits of this distinction, this section will also hint at the direction in which such contentions went.

In his essay on rent, Thomas Malthus expressed his dissent from the contemporary understanding of the subject. Rent, he argued, was perceived to be caused by the excess of price over the cost of production at which raw produce sells. This made, “...all these writers...to consider rent as too nearly resembling in its nature...the characteristic of a monopoly.”<sup>3</sup> Malthus pointed out that one of them, David Buchanan, the editor of Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations*, even described this monopoly as “...prejudicial, and as depriving the consumer of what it gives to the landlord.”<sup>4</sup> Rent, Malthus argued, was indeed linked to differential fertility of soil, and the comparative scarcity of the best lands did create a situation of natural

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<sup>2</sup>Eric Stokes, *The English Utilitarians and India*, Delhi, 1989, 81.

<sup>3</sup>T. R. Malthus, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Progress of Rent, and the Principles by which it is regulated*, London, 1815, 12.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid, 14.

monopoly. But he emphasized that, “On this account, perhaps, the term *partial monopoly* might be fairly applicable...”,<sup>5</sup> because scarcity was not the basis of the excess of price over the cost of production, which generated rent. On the contrary, he argued, this excess primarily reflected the peculiar capacity of land to generate a much greater amount of the bare necessities of life than what was required to support the persons cultivating it. Further, the excess of price was also linked to that peculiar tendency of the bare necessities of life to raise its demand in proportion to the amount produced by the land. Malthus pointed out that along with these two major factors, a comparative scarcity of fertile lands *also* functioned to create rent.

It can be seen that Malthus understood the monopolistic element in land to emanate from its unique capacity to generate an excess of the fundamental requirements of life. Land, Malthus argued, harboured “...a most estimable quality...which God has bestowed on man—the quality of being able to maintain more persons than are necessary to work it.”<sup>6</sup> As long as this “bountiful gift of providence” was equally available to all, the surplus appeared more as high profits and high wages, and less as rent. However, as the population and the demand for produce increase, production gets pushed to less fertile lands. This results in the reduction of profits and wages, but the rising demand increases the price of produce. In these conditions, the surplus over the cost of production emerged as rent. In this manner, Malthus traced rent, like profits and wages, fundamentally to the unique characteristic of land to produce a surplus in the necessities of life beyond the requirements of its producers. It is this divinely ordained *surplus* which, at a certain stage of society, marked by an increasing population, and a comparative scarcity of fertile land, was found to differentiate itself into falling profits and wages, and rising rents.<sup>7</sup>

Even Ricardo believed that rent, as a separately distinguishable portion of the produce of land, could emerge only at such an advanced state of society when production was taken to the margin of fertility. But he was critical of rent, as it was created by differential fertility of soil, which was not the source of value. Exchangeable value, Ricardo argued, was generated by the quantity of labour

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid, 15.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid, 20.

<sup>7</sup>“Rent then has been traced to the same common nature with that *general surplus* from the land, which is the result of certain qualities of the soil and its products; and it has been found to commence its separation from profits, as soon as profits and wages fall, owing to the comparative scarcity of fertile land in the natural progress of a country towards wealth and population.” Ibid, 23.

involved in the production of raw produce on the least fertile land, which did not pay rent. In other words, value was entirely an expression of the amount of labour involved in the production of any commodity. With an increase in population, and the demand for food, as cultivation is forced to the less fertile lands, difficulties of production also increased. The cost of production at such margins increased, because more labour than usual was required to produce a particular quantity of produce. This led to a rise in prices. Ricardo clearly pointed out, that “The reason then, why raw produce rises in comparative value, is because more labour is employed in the production of the last portion obtained, and not because a rent is paid to the landlord. The value of corn is regulated by the quantity of labour bestowed on its production on that quality of land, or with that portion of capital, which pays no rent. Corn is not high because a rent is paid, but a rent is paid because corn is high...”<sup>8</sup> Unlike Malthus, Ricardo did not believe that land was the fulcrum of life because it possessed a unique capacity to create a bountiful surplus of necessities. His theory of diminishing returns established labour, not land, as the quintessential reservoir of value. As civilization advanced, Ricardo predicted, “Man would do more by the sweat of his brow, and nature perform less; and the land would be no longer pre-eminent for its limited powers.”<sup>9</sup>

But it is precisely at this juncture, when man laboured more, and nature offered less, that rent emerged. Labouring on less fertile lands hiked the cost of production and the price of raw produce. As successively poorer soils came under the fold of cultivation, the relative value of more fertile soils increased. Labour’s loss was the landlord’s gain. In other words, rents went up only when profits and wages fell. The landlord was enriched at the cost of capital and labour. Ricardo noted that, “it is obvious that the landlord is doubly benefited by difficulty of production. First he obtains a greater share, and secondly the commodity in which he is paid is of greater value.”<sup>10</sup> Quite naturally, he concluded, that the interest of the landlord is opposed to the interest of the rest of the community.

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<sup>8</sup>David Ricardo, *On the Principles of Political Economy and Taxation*, Third Edition, London, 1821, 51.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid, 64.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid, 60.

Malthus, however, maintained that “...it seems scarcely possible to consider the interests of the landlord as separated from the general interests of the society.”<sup>11</sup> He countered Ricardo’s argument with his views on agricultural improvement. Rising rents did not necessarily signify declining cultivation, Malthus retorted. He refused to accept Ricardo’s deduction that landlords were opposed to improvements which led to a fall in both prices and rents. It is here that the theory-practice and abstract-concrete binaries were invoked as an internal critique of political economy. Ricardo’s views, Malthus argued, were the result of erroneous abstract reasoning. He observed that, “...I doubt, if a single instance in the history of Europe, or any other part of the world, can be produced, where improvements in agriculture have been *practically* found to lower rents.”<sup>12</sup> Improvements, even if they are considerable, are always followed by a corresponding power of population to increase up to the additional limit of production. The high elasticity of the demand for necessities, caused by the inherent tendency of biological life to grow, immediately attracted new lands to cultivation. In this way, all over the world, Malthus argued with examples, rents increased out of an increase of the total produce, which was engendered by improvements. Ricardo failed to take this into account because he thought that rents increased only with the increasing difficulty of production. For Malthus, this was a narrow view of rent, and he noted, once again, that “...such a view of rent embraces only a very small part of the subject, and consequently that any general inferences from it must be utterly inapplicable to practice...”<sup>13</sup>

However, what Malthus presented as a *practical* viewpoint, I argue, was evidently rooted in his own theoretical presuppositions. It emerged from his view of land as the ever-abundant fundamental provider, i.e. God. As various scholars have noted, Malthus had a strong agrarian bias in his conceptual formulations regarding the economy of a nation. His support for the Corn Laws emerged from this position. He believed that the situation of rising prices and food scarcity in contemporary Britain could not be effectively solved, on a long-term basis, by importing food. In order to develop a strong economy, a country must be self-sufficient in the production of the basic necessities of life. Even if such agricultural protectionism generated a rise in prices, and a decline in wages, these factors would act as natural restrictions to a

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<sup>11</sup>T. R. Malthus, *Principles of Political Economy Considered with a View to their Practical Application*, Second Edition, London, 1836, 144.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid, 145.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid, 147.

growing population. But it was more necessary for the population to have a greater command over the necessities of life drawn from agriculture, than lead an “unwholesome” existence in manufacturing. Donald Winch argues that, “this was a case where the conclusions of his science of morals took precedence over the science of wealth narrowly conceived. If vice and misery could be reduced by slowing down the growth of manufacturing, this should be made part of the moral calculus, even if it entailed lower per capita incomes on aggregate...”<sup>14</sup>

Malthus’s difference with Ricardo, thus, reflected different theoretical/universal frameworks of political economy. It was not a difference over abstract and concrete forms of political economy, although it was posed in these terms. Malthus’s own abstractions came out even more clearly as he explained the particular conditions which defined rent in different parts of the world. In discussing these conditions, Malthus drew a distinction between natural and artificial monopolies of land. He noted that in all Eastern countries, where the sovereign is the owner of the soil, rent arises prematurely, much before an advanced state of cultivation demands its separation from wages and profits out of the general surplus.<sup>15</sup> Here Malthus acknowledged his debt to Richard Jones’s work on rents. Although it might appear that Malthus shared Jones’s premises in arguing that Ricardo’s theoretical system was based on abstract reasoning, which was erroneous due to its inapplicability to the specific practical conditions of the world. However, I will argue that just like Jones, Malthus too had a set of theoretical presuppositions which defined and placed limits to what he termed “practical”.

While Malthus agreed with Jones in describing rent in ‘eastern countries’ as an outcome of political power, he ultimately chose to root it in natural causes. Thus, he argued that, “whatever may be the nature of the monopoly of land, whether necessary or artificial, it will be observed that the power of paying a rent...on the land, is completely limited by its fertility.”<sup>16</sup> Unlike Jones, he did not believe that the rent, all over the world, was determined by a configuration of property and political power. That is why, despite describing the circumstances of India and China as different, he quickly absolved the difference by arguing that rent, all over the world, is caused by

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<sup>14</sup>Donald Winch, *Malthus*, Oxford & New York, 1987, 60. This is why, although Malthus and Ricardo defined rent in the same way, there was a “...conflict of interpretation...” which, as Blaug notes, “had to do with the nature and origin of rent and the relation of agriculture to the national welfare.” Mark Blaug, *Ricardian Economics: A Historical Study*, New Haven, 1958, 80.

<sup>15</sup>Malthus, *Principles of Political Economy*, 119.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

the same factor, namely, variations in the fertility of soil. In the letters he wrote to William Whewell, he noted that he valued Jones's work, and was happy to know that his differences with Ricardo are also shared by Jones. But even then, he insisted that Jones, in criticizing Ricardo, was drawing incorrect conclusions. Malthus pointed out that, "[i]n his zeal to show that Mr. Ricardo is quite wrong...in dwelling upon the diminished returns of agricultural capital as the sole cause of increasing rents, he seems inclined to deny the undoubted truth of the natural tendency to such diminished returns in a *limited space*, unless prevented by improvements..."<sup>17</sup> He emphasized that this tendency of diminishing returns is the general principle of the emergence and increase of rents.

Such were the epistemological limits to what Malthus presented as a "concrete/practical" political economy. The theoretical foundation of this political economy was a faith in land, as the fundamental provider of life. This was Malthus's own principle of abstraction. It reflected his belief in the power of nature as determining of political-economic categories. Even in the study of particular situations where he admitted that rent was produced by the imposition of a particular form of political power on land, he ultimately upheld differential natural capacities of the soil as the point of its origin. It is the same naturalist conviction which made him argue that improvements would be the source of increase of rents in the future everywhere in the world. He noted that, "for the very great increase of rents which has taken place in this country during nearly the last hundred years, we are mainly indebted to improvements in agriculture, as profits have rather risen than fallen, and little or nothing has been taken from the wages of families..."<sup>18</sup> This view was also part of a crucial difference with Ricardo. Through an advocacy of improvements, Malthus also presented the landlord as a figure capable of stimulating agricultural production. The landlord was not against improvements, as they ensured him increased rental returns without a correspondent fall in the total produce. Malthus believed that as the custodian of the most important producer, land, his interests had to be united with the rest of the society. He did not argue that the landlord was necessarily an active improver. But at the same time, unlike the common explanation of his pro-landlord position, he did not only characterize landlords as "unproductive

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<sup>17</sup>Letter from T.R. Malthus to William Whewell, 31 May 1831, as cited in N.B. de Marchi and R. P. Sturges, "Malthus and Ricardo's Inductivist Critics: Four Letters to William Whewell", *Economica*, N.S., 40, 60, November 1973, 391.

<sup>18</sup>Malthus, *Principles of Political Economy*, 146.



consumers”, whose primary economic role was to stimulate demand by excessive spending. He wanted the landlords, as David Cannadine points out, to spend on the improvement of agriculture. Malthus wrote that the landlords should make “substantial repairs of all the cottages on their estates”, and be interested “to build, to improve and beautify their grounds, and to employ workmen and menial servants...”<sup>19</sup> In fact, he noted that often, as was the case in Ireland, the landlords, in the greed of obtaining higher rents, let their lands to inefficient tenants. But all landlords were not as imprudent as the Irish ones. Being aware of the distinction between short and long term benefits, they had the potential of acting wisely in choosing substantial tenants, who would, with the aid of improvements, increase rents. Thomas Malthus, thus, differed from the dominant, Ricardian framing of political economy. In differing, however, he did not produce a more concretized political economy, despite claims to do so. As I have shown, his definition of the concrete, or his practical explanation of rent, was rooted in other forms of abstraction.

### **“Theory” vs “practice”: an opposition?**

This section intends to develop what the previous one hinted at, namely, the area of methodological contention in political economy between the “theoretical” and the “practical”. By dissecting both categories involved in the opposition, this section will suggest that beyond the visibility of the opposition there were invisible lines of consensus. In a certain sense, therefore, the opposition was a false one. It was significant nevertheless, as it acted as an analytical pointer to a redefinition of core political-economic categories. These points will be established through an examination of both the critique of Ricardian political economy, and its rebuttal.

In reviewing Richard Jones’s book, “An Essay on the Distribution of Wealth and the Sources of Taxation”, William Whewell noted that, “Political economy...must be concerned with the laws of the production and distribution of wealth as they actually operate in different countries and different forms of society. It must be a science concerned with actual facts and daily observations...”<sup>20</sup> Whewell was an old friend of Jones. Their friendship developed in Cambridge, where they met

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<sup>19</sup>David Cannadine, “Conspicuous Consumption by the Landed Classes, 1790-1830” in *Malthus and His Time* ed. Michael Turner, London, 1986, 103.

<sup>20</sup>William Whewell, “Review of Richard Jones’s *An Essay on the Distribution of Wealth and on the Sources of Taxation*”, *British Critic, and quarterly theological review*, 10, 19, July 1831, 52.

as students. In Cambridge, along with Charles Babbage and John Herschel, they had formed a group which thought similarly, in their respective individual areas of study, about methodological questions involved in the formation of scientific knowledge. Other than Jones, the rest were all students of, and subsequently, scholars in, the natural sciences. Whewell was the intellectual nerve centre of this group, who articulated, in an organized fashion, those interests which had built strong intellectual and personal ties between these men since their days as students.<sup>21</sup> Over successive and systematic treatises, Whewell developed the philosophy of “Inductivism”, which, he argued, was the only proper method of gaining true knowledge in any branch of science—natural, moral, or political. As it befitted the role of a pioneer, he wrote on diverse subjects, including mechanics, astronomy, geology, mineralogy, political economy, education, architecture, and moral philosophy.

Jones’s book, Whewell believed, was a fine example of the adoption of an inductivist approach to political economy. Moreover, he argued that it was particularly important to rebuild political economy as an inductive science, because most of its leading doctrines, claiming to explain complex issues affecting the lives and livelihoods of the masses, were nothing but a bunch of false conclusions; yet at the same time they were influential enough to become part of popular commonsense. He spelt out these worries clearly in the review. “Political economy...must be a science of *induction* and not of *deduction*. It must *obtain* its principles by reasoning upwards from facts, before it can *apply* them by reasoning downwards from axioms...these maxims...have been strangely lost sight of, and indeed have of late been absolutely denied. In recent times, and especially since the publication of Mr. Ricardo’s treatise, the science has been put altogether in a deductive form...”<sup>22</sup>

Jones shared Whewell’s critique. In his book, as well as in other scattered pieces of writing, he made Ricardian political economy the central object of his criticism. Almost echoing Whewell’s words, Jones wrote in his book: “Mr. Ricardo was a man of talent, and he produced a system very ingeniously combined, of purely hypothetical truths; which, however, a single comprehensive glance at the world as it actually exists, is sufficient to show to be utterly inconsistent with the past and present

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<sup>21</sup>See Laura Snyder, *The Philosophical Breakfast Club*, New York, 2011.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*

condition of mankind.”<sup>23</sup> As it is evident, observation of facts seemed to be the epistemological basis of the kind of political economy Richard Jones attempted to develop. William Whewell wanted to develop a general method of inquiry for all branches of knowledge out of the same principle. He noted that, as opposed to this, a deductivist approach to knowledge explained each and every element of the field under study by reasoning logically from a very small number of fundamental axioms. Ricardian political economy was a classic example of such a methodology. In it, Whewell pointed out, everything related to production and distribution was explained by the application of various combinations of three fundamental principles—the theory of population, the doctrine of rent, and the measure of exchange value. None of these principles was obtained on the basis of a systematic collection of facts. As a result, when they were made occasion for sweeping generalizations, they naturally produced nothing but absolutely false conclusions.

A deductive approach was not inherently flawed. Whewell argued that there were parts of physical science where it could be successfully exercised. But they were those rare areas of science where a completeness of knowledge had been reached. Not more than two or three branches of physics, namely physical astronomy and mechanics, and partially optics, could claim such a status. But these were ancient disciplines, which had taken the time and labour of generations to attain this state. Compared to them, Whewell noted, “[I]t will...be a most strange and singular circumstance in the history of sciences, if political economy, the youngest of them, the most complex, mixed and vast in its subjects, depending on the most subtle, obscure and unmeasurable elements, should have sprung at once to this ultimate condition, this goal and limit of its possible intellectual progress.”<sup>24</sup>

These were the oppositions—theory-practice, hypothesis-observation, deductive-inductive. But these were not only the creation of the self-styled inductivist position. The theory-practice opposition featured in the writings of all leading political economists of this period, irrespective of their allegiances to a deductive or an inductive method. Even Malthus, in criticizing Ricardo, claimed to put forward opinions more attentive to “practical” conditions. But, as I have argued, these differences remained theoretical ones. They emerged from different assumptions

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<sup>23</sup>Richard Jones, *An Essay on the Distribution of Wealth and on the Sources of Taxation*, London, 1831, vii.

<sup>24</sup>Whewell, “Review of Richard Jones’s *An Essay on the Distribution of Wealth and on the Sources of Taxation*”, 55.

undergirding different conceptualizations of the relation between land and production. Similarly, both Whewell and Jones, and their opponents, to whom I turn later, frequently flagged this opposition, despite being rooted, I will argue, in positions of universality. Whewell expressed surprise at the "...project of converting a study concerned with the endless variety of facts and relations which belong to political economy, into a result of definitions and axioms."<sup>25</sup> I will argue, in the rest of this section, that despite their diatribe against a priori generalizations in political economy, all of them, Ricardians or otherwise, operated with such generalities which organized every bit of their statements in this field of study. In my opinion, everyone, contrary to what Whewell might want us to believe, worked very much *within* different frames of a priori reasoning. In this sense, nothing in political economy was out of what was identified in this methodological debate as the domain of "theory".

But the theory-practice opposition was maintained as the focal point of this debate. J. R. McCulloch used the opposition to answer the criticism aimed at Ricardian political economy. As a committed Ricardian, he came up with an extremely harsh and dismissive review of Jones's book in the *Edinburgh Review*. Referring to the theory-practice divide, McCulloch exclaimed that Jones had confused elements as different as weight and colour in his work. Accepting the critique that was directed at Ricardo from the perspective of a "practical" political economy, McCulloch declared, "...Mr. Ricardo's book is one of principle only, and that it is not to be judged by a merely practical standard..."<sup>26</sup> McCulloch's support for "theory" is worth probing in a greater detail, keeping in mind the way the category had been defined by Whewell and Jones. After claiming Ricardo for "theory", McCulloch immediately pointed out that the former restricted his researches, and conclusions to rents that were paid by farmers cultivating for profit under a system of free competition. In other words, McCulloch noted, Ricardo's work referred to "...rents as they actually exist in England, Holland, the United States, and a few other countries..."<sup>27</sup> Ricardo did not intend, McCulloch continued, to define, "taxes on the land imposed by the sovereign, and the sums wrung by taskmasters from the reluctant

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<sup>25</sup>Ibid, 54.

<sup>26</sup>J. R. McCulloch, "Review of Richard Jones's *An Essay on the Distribution of Wealth and on the Sources of Taxation*", *Edinburgh Review*, 54, 107, September 1831, 85.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid, 86.

labour of slaves, [as] rent...”<sup>28</sup>, just as he did not wish to call allowances to slaves in the West Indies, “wages”.

These statements clearly bring out the conceptual investments in McCulloch’s use of the category of “theory”. I will sort out what seems to be a contradiction in this use. McCulloch initially seemed to argue that “theory” is a mode of explanation which does not represent actual conditions of life. But later he noted that Ricardo’s “theory” does represent actual conditions of life, but not all of them. So the argument for “theory” did not necessarily exclude the condition of representability. McCulloch did not drive an absolute wedge between “theory” and actual life. Rather, he segregated certain kinds of practical conditions which, according to him, legitimately belonged to the domain of representability, from others which did not. Political-economic principles, and, by extension, the practical field they adequately resembled, his vivisection suggested, were only for populations which lived and produced under free markets. The rest, like slave-labour in West Indies, or Asian cultivators, were banished from both the “theoretical” and the “practical” in political economy. This is how the contradiction in McCulloch’s statements got resolved. He did retain both arguments: a) “theory” and “practice” were in opposition, and Ricardo’s work did not cover practical situations; here ‘theory’ stood for free-markets, and “practice” for slavery; b) “theory” and “practice” were unified, one neatly representing the other, in this case Ricardo’s work explaining rents in England, Holland, and the United States. Thus, “theory” in political economy did not exclude the “practical”. On the contrary, it was rooted in “practical” conditions only. Despite this, for McCulloch, there were some forms of the “practical” which did not feature in this debate. Amongst them, were the slaves and the ryots. They were pre-epistemological, unworthy of being considered as part of the enlightened orbits of political economy, or knowledge.

The participants in the theory-practice debate soon pointed out, as they explicated the conflictual terrain in greater detail, that the opposition was between good and bad theories. Ultimately, all of them defined “theory” as a form of explanation in which was included all practical phenomena. Apparently, Whewell and Jones, from a supposedly “practical” perspective, argued that Ricardo’s “theory” did not represent factual conditions of life. But by the same token, they also implied that, it was not a “theory” at all. Rather, their own exposition of political economy, since it

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<sup>28</sup>Ibid, 87, 90.

successfully explained all practical conditions of life, was “theory”, in the true sense of the category. The debate, therefore, I will argue, was not between “theory” and “practice”; rather it was a conflict over the legitimate domain of the “practical/theoretical”. Everyone agreed that true “theory”, should be able to explain “practice”; but everyone disagreed on what ground the “practical” should include, in order to be a legitimate object of the “theoretical”. These disagreements, I will argue, emerged from the different sets of a priori generalities with which each contestant in the field began their respective journeys towards the writing of political economy.

For example, in Ricardian political economy, as I have shown earlier, the definition of rent was based on the assumption of an economy, where production was carried out by capitalist farmers and agricultural labourers on land leased from landlords. It is these “practical” conditions that the “theory” of rent sought to represent. Wherever production was carried out under differently, those “practical” conditions remained out of the scope of Ricardian political economy. It was a particular conceptualization of production and distribution that determined what “theory”, unified with “practice” would look like.

Whewell and Jones pointed out that such a “theory” was useless, because it failed to explain the greater part of the practical conditions of the world. What they implied was that it can hardly be called “theory”. Their attack was double-edged. On the one hand, Whewell argued that even if he accepted McCulloch’s retort that Ricardo’s definition of rent did not intend to cover all those payments which are commonly called rent, “the reader might be left to decide for himself which subject of inquiry may be the better worth his notice,—the rents that are actually paid in *every* country, or the Ricardian rents, which are *not* those actually paid in *any* country.”<sup>29</sup> On the other hand, he also emphasized that, contrary to what McCulloch represented, Ricardo did not confine his researches to a small section of the world. His conclusions did have a claim of universality. Even Jones, in one of his letters to Whewell, maintained this position.<sup>30</sup> Keeping in mind this claim, Ricardo’s “theory” seemed all the more baseless. Jones was amused by such universal claims which did not even remotely correspond to the facts of life. He asked his readers to imagine a situation where different kinds of landholders were being taught the fundamental doctrines of

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<sup>29</sup>William Whewell (ed.), *Literary Remains, consisting of Lectures and Tracts on Political economy of the late Rev. Richard Jones*, London, 1859, xii-xiii.

<sup>30</sup>See “Richard Jones to William Whewell, 3 November, 7 November, 1831”, Nos. 42, 43, *Whewell Papers*, Wren Library, Trinity College, Cambridge, Add. Mss. C 52.

Ricardian political economy. The teacher was telling these landholders, that their interest was opposed to the rest of the society, that rent depended on the fertility of soil only, that no improvements of their income might emerge from an increase of rents, or an increased fertility of the soil, and many more of such Ricardian precepts. Jones remarked that the audience "...would be apt to believe, that the philosopher they were listening to must have fallen from some other planet: that the scene of his experience must have differed widely from the scenes of theirs..."<sup>31</sup>

For Jones and Whewell, all along, it was a battle to prove greater universality. Thus, incorporating the 'practical', or, as I will document later, the 'local/indigenous', into their explanatory framework, was an analytical move to achieve total universality. They believed that the power of 'theory' stemmed from its capacity to explain each and every bit of the practical conditions of the world. In that sense, Ricardo was powerless, as his 'theory' was fragile. Whewell was pretty candid about his realization that a profound sense of power could be felt from being able to explain the world as it is. In a letter to Jones, he wrote, "You know as well as I do that those who theorize rightly are in the end the lords of the earth."<sup>32</sup> The program of induction, as Whewell argued, aimed at moving from observed facts to generalization, and, further, in a spiralling manner, to higher and higher generalizations.<sup>33</sup> In its political-economic articulation, it had the ambition of a super-synoptic gaze, which wished to wrap up, at

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<sup>31</sup>Jones, *An Essay on the Distribution of Wealth*, 183.

<sup>32</sup>"William Whewell to Richard Jones, 1 July 1832", I. Todhunter (ed.), *William Whewell, D.D. Master of Trinity College, Cambridge: An Account of His Writings with Selections from his Literary and Scientific Correspondence*, Vol. 2, London, 1876, 142. Samuel Hollander argues that with time, Whewell expressed doubts about the possibility of developing an inductive method of inquiry in the moral and political sciences. He did not have too many examples to depend upon, and, therefore, constantly urged Jones to finish his work. Hollander writes that, "Whewell's concern that Jones had failed to provide adequate illustrations of the proposed approach grew with the latter's failure to publish the later parts of his work on *Distribution of Wealth*. And we find him soon complaining that Jones was 'lapsing into definitions'." Samuel Hollander, "William Whewell and John Stuart Mill on the Methodology of Political economy", *Studies in the History and Philosophy of Science*, 14, 2, 1983, 142. In my opinion, Whewell was more impatient than doubtful, especially when it came to the moral and political sciences. He wanted more works to come out in these domains, so that they can further move towards the construction of gradually ascending generalities based on inductively established fundamental premises. It is almost as if he wanted these sciences to come up with their own highly schematized tables of induction, similar to the one he had prepared for astronomy. This only shows his relentless striving towards the achievement of immutable systems of explanation, or better "theory", in all fields of knowledge.

<sup>33</sup>"As they rise from the particular to the general, they rise from what is general to what is more general. Each induction supplies the materials of fresh inductions; each generalization, with all that it embraces in its circle, may be found to be but one of many circles, comprehended within the circuit of some wider generalization." William Whewell, *The Philosophy of the Inductive Sciences, founded upon their history*, Vol. 1, London, 1840, 46.

a single glance, the infinite diversity of lives and livelihoods in the world, into a single frame of explanation.

### **A new land for “theory”: James Mill and a reinterpreted Ricardian universalism**

McCulloch was not the only interpreter of the problematic of representability in Ricardian political economy. James Mill, an equally ardent devotee of Ricardo’s system had a very different take on the matter. Like Whewell and Jones, he believed that a true “theory” should be able to account for all “practical” conditions of the world; unlike McCulloch, he did not think that Ricardian categories only explained the ‘practical’ conditions of countries where production and distribution of wealth took place under conditions of high population, free market, and a capitalist economy. I am tempted to call him a truer follower of Ricardo. His systematic demonstration of the universality of Ricardo’s system evinced his unwavering faith in it. His efforts can be seen as a fitting response to the critique of Ricardo that was raised by Whewell and Jones. But despite his astute defence of Ricardo’s system, I argue, the epistemological assumption of this defence was the same as that of Ricardo’s arch-enemies, namely, Jones and Whewell. These were the invisible lines of consensus between apparently conflicting perspectives.

James Mill did not think, like McCulloch, that what Ricardo defined as “rent” was categorically different from other kinds of payments, like, “...taxes on the land imposed by the sovereign...”<sup>34</sup> in an Eastern country. It is important here to highlight the presuppositions of this notion of difference. McCulloch argued that, “From the remotest era down to the present moment, the land of almost every Eastern country has been regarded as the exclusive property of the sovereign, who was thus enabled to fix the terms on which it should be occupied...”<sup>35</sup> whereas in England, land belonged to individuals, and cultivators were not enslaved. For McCulloch, a difference in the structures of property ownership between England and the “Eastern countries”, made the Ricardian category of “rent” inapplicable to the latter. Evidently, this was a view based on the perception of a fundamental linkage between property and political

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<sup>34</sup>McCulloch, “Review of Richard Jones’s *An Essay on the Distribution of Wealth and on the Sources of Taxation*”, *Edinburgh Review*, 86.

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid*, 87.



power. It is this linkage which defined “despotism” as an absolute and arbitrary form of power rooted in the total ownership of property by the sovereign. In McCulloch’s scheme, such was the basis of the polity of all “Eastern countries”, as different from the free and individual forms of property-ownership in England, which laid the foundation of its polity. I will contend that in this conceptual constellation, property-ownership was imagined to be constitutive of political power, and this property-power complex was supposed to demarcate the epistemological field of political economy. Based on these assumptions, McCulloch reasoned that “despotic” polities cannot be legitimate domains of political-economic inquiry. For him, they harbored those “practical” conditions that the “theory” of political economy did not need to address.

James Mill, however, did not envision these “despotic” polities as lying beyond the scope of Ricardian political economy. While admitting that political-economic analysis is embedded in the relation between property and political power, he defined this relation differently. Mill argued that not only the form of property ownership, but the category of “property” itself in India was different from its European counterpart. He noted that “In a state of society resembling our own, in which property is secure, and involves very extensive rights or privileges...in minds of little range...the particulars combined together under the idea of property appear to be connected by nature...”<sup>36</sup> It would be presumptuous, Mill emphasized, to infer from this perception of “property”, that the category expressed the same kinds of rights at all times and in all places. On the contrary, by the gradual association of different kinds of rights, the category of “property” came into shape differently in different places. It is only with a considerable civilizational progress, Mill suggested, that “property” can be found to convey all those rights which characterized its European form.

But in India, Mill argued, although the sovereign was the lord of the soil, there were important restrictions to his right of property. The ryot, or peasant cultivator, who held land, could not be removed from possession by the sovereign, if he continued to pay the amount of assessment demanded from him. His right of possession was saleable during his life, and inheritable after his death. Describing the proprietary status of the ryot, Mill remarked: “...I should think it might be more

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<sup>36</sup>James Mill, *History of British India*, Volume I, Book II, Fifth Edition with notes and continuation by H.H. Wilson, London, 1997, (1858), 208.

properly expressed by saying that he has a property in the land, than that he has the property of the land. There is no doubt that he has a property in it, because he has a right of perpetual occupancy, and the right of cultivation, subject to the demands of government.”<sup>37</sup> Although Mill admitted that landed “property” in India was *different* from that in Europe by including the right of the ryot within the semantic fold of “property”, he did not take this redefinition too far. His explanation ultimately took a Ricardian turn, when he chose to take two connected analytical moves. Firstly, he marked the right to receive rent as the defining feature of “property”, thereby, acknowledging the sovereign’s right in the land as superior than the ryot’s.<sup>38</sup> In the same breath, he also contended that the ryot’s right, instead of being “proprietary”, was, effectively, merely a right to cultivate the same field.<sup>39</sup> Secondly, he categorized the government demand on the ryot as “rent”, in the Ricardian sense of the term, by describing it as “the surplus, after the capital and labour bestowed upon the produce has been replaced and paid.”<sup>40</sup> He argued that “according to the practice and law of India, the full rent is due of Government...”<sup>41</sup> This practice, he emphasized, “has no inconsiderable recommendation from science itself. Previous to allotment, the productive powers of the soil are the joint property of the community; and hence are a fund peculiarly adapted to the joint or common purposes and demands...”<sup>42</sup> By representing the state in India as the sovereign proprietor of land or the universal landlord, he established the contemporary political-economic category of “rent” as something consistent with age-old “Indian” practice.

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<sup>37</sup>Evidence by James Mill, August 2 1831, *Report from the Select Committee on the Affairs of the East India Company, Parliamentary Papers, 1831*, 308.

<sup>38</sup>He put rent-property ahead of “proprietary” rights based on cultivation, or on the application of one’s labour to the soil. (See next footnote) Mill argued that, “the real beneficial interest of a proprietor of land under an European tenure may be considered to be measured by the rent he can obtain for it; but in the case of the ryot, the person whom you would call the proprietor has none of the rent, nor is entitled to it.” *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup>This is how Mill made a hierarchical distinction—where the former was superior to the latter—between the following two senses of “property”: a) arising from the ownership of the rent of land, and b) arising from the right to labour on the same plot of soil for a long period of time. “The sovereigns in India had not only the *ownership*, but all the benefit of the land; the ryots had merely the privilege of employing their labour always upon the same soil, and of transferring that privilege to some other person...” Mill, *History of British India*, 224, emphasis mine.

<sup>40</sup>Evidence by James Mill, August 18 1831, *Report from the Select Committee on the Affairs of the East India Company, Parliamentary Papers, 1831*, 362.

<sup>41</sup>James Mill, “Observations on the Land Revenue of India”, Esq., Appendix No. 7, *Report from the Select Committee on the Affairs of the East India Company; with minutes of evidence in six parts, and an appendix and index to each, P.P., 1831-32*.

<sup>42</sup>Mill, *History of British India*, 226.

As an administrative prescription, therefore, which had already been established by him as a practice continuous with the past, Mill noted that the legitimate limit of the government demand was the full 'rent'. He admitted that this limit had not been always followed in the past, when arbitrary exactions took over the political-economic or "scientific" principle of taxation. But even then he did not believe "...that such is a necessary consequence of the system by any means."<sup>43</sup> Not only did Mill graft the Ricardian category of rent into the government dues from land in India, he also used Ricardo's critical attitude towards the rent-receivers, or landlords, in a significantly reinterpreted manner. By defining the government dues as "rent", and not as a tax on either capital or revenue, he exorcized what Ricardian political economy had called "the great evil of taxation".<sup>44</sup> Rent, as an income of private landlords in Europe, had already been identified in political economy as devoid of productive value. Mill's construal of the state in India as the paramount landlord was, therefore, fundamentally, a critique of the institution of private property arising from the reception of rent. Mill suggested that it is only a particular form of property ownership, where the state was the universal landlord, which allowed the full "rent" to be the basis of the fund derived from taxation, as this was to be spent by the state towards the improvement of the community. At this point Mill's analysis took a turnaround, as he hierarchized *difference* in the reverse direction. The kind of linkage between property and political power he favoured was present in India, and absent in Europe.

This *difference* was crucial to the field of inquiry of political economy itself. I have already argued that the linkage between property and political power was perceived to be the constitutive ground of political economy. This assumption was, in a sense, hidden in McCulloch, but was brought out in his review of Jones's work. For James Mill, as the discussion shows, it was the central problematic of political economy—clearly recognized, discussed in detail, and analyzed ultimately in a Ricardian light, notwithstanding the major reinterpretations. Other than his administrative works, where he treated the problematic in a more systematic manner, he also highlighted it in his book, *The Elements of Political Economy*, where he clearly pointed out his preferences. After defining "rent" in the same manner as

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<sup>43</sup>Evidence by James Mill, August 18 1831, *Report from the Select Committee on the Affairs of the East India Company*, P.P., 1831, 362.

<sup>44</sup>Ricardo, *On the Principles of Political Economy and Taxation*, 134.

Ricardo, Mill argued that, “It is sufficiently obvious, that the share of the rent of land, which may be taken to defray the expenses of the government, does not affect the industry of the country.”<sup>45</sup> He further noted that while in the major polities of Asia “almost the whole expenses of the state have in all ages been defrayed from the rent of land”, in Europe it took place only in the remote past when the sovereign was the proprietor of land, and the greater part of the expenses of the country was defrayed from the rent of the land. Interestingly, this equivalence between the European past and the Asian present was not cast into the mould of a progressivist hierarchy. Europe’s present did not feature as the final teleological destination in James Mill’s analysis of the linkage between property and political power. Rather, Mill seemed to lament over Europe’s present. His anguish was blurted out in *The History of British India*:

“...The benefits of the soil have...over the greater part of the globe, been employed, first, to supply in whole, or for the greater part, the necessities of government, next to enrich the individual occupant. The most remarkable exception to this rule is in modern Europe. After the conquests of the Gothic nations, the land was thrown in great portions into the hands of the leading men; and they had power to make the taxes fall where they chose; they took care accordingly that they should fall any where rather than upon the land; that is, upon any body rather than themselves...they not only threw the burden off their own shoulders, but taxed, as they have continued to do, and sometimes on a progressive ration, to the present hour, the rest of the community for their benefit.”<sup>46</sup>

This is how James Mill established the relation between property and political power as the structuring principle of the field of political-economic knowledge. His elaboration of differences, between the modes of property ownership, and their attendant forms of political power, in India and Europe, was a necessary epistemological building-block for his subsequent political-economic analysis, which, as I have shown, was unambiguously Ricardian. But his vision, I will argue, expanded the theoretical scope of Ricardian political economy, by using it to explain conditions which were based on a linkage between property and political power radically different from that of England. Mill’s reinterpretation of Ricardian political economy

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<sup>45</sup>James Mill, *Elements of Political Economy*, London, 1821, p 198.

<sup>46</sup>Mill, *History of British India*, 226.

was indeed remarkable. In a certain sense, this reinterpretation suggested that it was suited equally well to the relationship of property and power that it claimed to be based upon, and to conditions that were radically different. Thus, for Mill, Ricardian theory seemed to be valid for both “free” and “despotic” forms of property-ownership, and the polities based on them. Mill unhesitatingly declared his appreciation for what he construed as the Indian forms of landed property, political power, and mode of taxation. His only problem was with the corrupt, uncertain, and unequal manner in which this system operated, which, he believed, would be remedied by the able governance of the British.

It is here that my reading of James Mill deviates significantly from that of Stokes. Stokes understood that Ricardian ideas were radicalized by Mill, when he used the Ricardian definition of rent to put forward an absolute critique of private property. As he noted about Mill’s programme, “...to advocate state ownership or nationalization of the soil was to strike at the whole Liberal tradition for which the institution of private property was the tap-root of progress and individual liberty.”<sup>47</sup> But this was not a simple radicalization of Ricardian categories. Mill’s reinterpretation of Ricardo needs to be located within the epistemological turn in contemporary political economy. As I have demonstrated, Mill’s political-economic articulations were constituted by careful examinations of indigenous forms of interrelations between property and political power. In other words, Mill’s political economy had already started speaking in the vocabulary of the “political”, without being entirely able to exorcize itself of its Ricardian commitments. That is why, for Mill, the argument about state ownership of land did not signify a particularity of “Eastern/despotic” polities. On the contrary, it stood for the past condition of all nations of the world, and the ideal route for progress. In this scheme, it was England’s polity which was exceptional, since at its foundation was a regressive form of linkage between property and political power.

Thus, James Mill invested Ricardian political economy with a new universality. The “practical” conditions identified by McCulloch as external to political-economic explanation were explained by Mill in the light of a redefined Ricardianism. His construal of rent, property, and taxation in the context of British India, I argue, were linked to, and consistent with, his methodological position on the

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<sup>47</sup>Stokes, *The English Utilitarians*, 87.

theory-practice problematic. Unlike McCulloch, Mill believed that true “theory” should be consonant with all “practical” conditions of the world. His elaboration of Ricardian political economy in the context of Indian landed property and political power demonstrated that despite *difference*, “theory” and “practice” were unified. A return to the “theory-practice” opposition at this point is imperative, as James Mill was a seminal contributor to this methodological debate. In an imaginary dialogue entitled “Theory and Practice”, written for the *London and Westminster Review*, Mill analyzed the problem. The essay presented a conversation between two men, marked “X” and “Y”, where the former began by positing a total inconsistency between “theory” and “practice”, while the latter gradually and successfully persuaded the former about the necessary unity between the two.

Unarguably, Mill imagined himself to be in the position of “Y”. In discussing this essay, accordingly, I will refer to “Y” as James Mill. The dialogue began with “X” arguing that he is a follower of “practice”, because it is based on experience, and, therefore, in absolute opposition with “theory”, which is based on speculation. Mill, in response, stated that in order to achieve clarity in the discussion, a comparison must be made not between the mere terms “theory” and “practice”, but between the meanings they are associated with. As the conversation developed, “X” came to define “practice” as “the cases which may be regarded as constant”,<sup>48</sup> which Mill rephrased, with the former’s consent, as “cases in which like antecedents have been followed by like consequents in many times.”<sup>49</sup> Further, Mill pointed out that the knowledge of constancy in any area is dependent upon careful observation of a number of instances, and the remembrance of them. But then, Mill asked, “...this knowledge is only of the past; all practice regards the future...How is it that your knowledge of the past becomes a guide of the future?”<sup>50</sup> In reply, “X” argued that since these are *observed* sequences, of similar actions producing similar results, they can be safely expected to get repeated in the future.

Mill intervened at this point, claiming that this is exactly what “theory” stands for, namely “...drawing up a theorem for the guidance of the future from the observation of the past.”<sup>51</sup> “X” retorted, arguing that what he understood by “theory”,

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<sup>48</sup>James Mill, “Theory and Practice: A Dialogue”, *London and Westminster Review*, 3, 1, April 1836, 225.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid, 226.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid, 227.

like the vortices of Descartes, has no bearing to such observation. Mill's reply was, "As you began...by expressing a preference of experience to theory as a guide to practice, I concluded that we had in view only that class of theories which have a reference to future practice; not those attempts sometimes called theories, to account for certain phenomenon, that is, bring them under some law which is already ascertained."<sup>52</sup> As examples of the former category of "theory", Mill mentioned political economy and medicine. At this point "X" agreed that all such "theory" is based on some observation of the past. But he still maintained his refusal to accept Mill's argument, by pointing out that "...very few theories are correctly founded."<sup>53</sup> By this time, Mill had successfully persuaded his opponent to share the analytical presuppositions framing his argument, that "theory" and "practice" were unified. He pointed out that both "theory" and "practice" can be in error, because the source of such error in either case has to be incorrect observation. His campaign was over, as "Y" assented to his judgment: "When a man says that he follows practice, he says by the same words that he follows theory. All men, therefore, in every rational action of their lives are followers of theory; and they may be divided...into the two following classes—those who follow good and those who follow bad theory; the first sort acting always right..."<sup>54</sup>

For James Mill, the value of "theory" emerged entirely from its ability to explain the greatest possible range of "practice". He believed that a philosopher, whose task is to make "theory" as expansive as possible, was also the best practitioner.<sup>55</sup> I will argue that several of his analytical conclusions were shared by his arch-opponents, the "inductivist" political economists. Mill's emphasis on observation, his attempt to make all "practice" consistent with "theory", and also his argument that ultimately all "practice" is reducible to a small number of fundamental

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<sup>52</sup>Ibid.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid, 229.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid, 230.

<sup>55</sup>"The whole business of philosophy consists in the endeavor to render each theory as comprehensive as possible. The whole business of philosophy, therefore, is to furnish men as completely as possible for practice; and the best philosopher is by necessary consequence the best practitioner." Ibid, 231. It is worth noting here Robert Fenn's comment on this essay. Fenn argues that, "If there was any aspect of Mill's intellectual efforts for the amelioration of society that he would have prided himself on, it would have been his emphasis on the necessary relation between correct theory and sound practice. It was not only the topic of his last published work, it clearly dominated many of his considerations regarding social reform..." Robert Fenn, *James Mill's Political Thought*, New York & London, 1987, 128.

philosophical principles<sup>56</sup>—all these commonalities, in my opinion, call in question the methodological distance Whewell and Jones posited between themselves and the Ricardians. In the next section, I will try to analytically disaggregate the entanglements—both convergences and divergences—between these apparently opposed methodological positions.

### **Framing the “political”, redefining (Ricardian) political economy**

Richard Jones wrote *An Essay on the Distribution of Wealth and on the Sources of Taxation* in 1831, following which, in 1833, he was appointed as professor of political economy at King’s College, London.<sup>57</sup> The *Essay* was a treatise on rent, and also the first part of a projected work on other major categories of political economy. Jones, however, was not a prolific writer. The other parts never got written. Jones became significant, to his contemporaries, primarily as a critic of Ricardo,<sup>58</sup> which obviously reflects the enormous influence Ricardo’s theory of rent—with which Jones directly engaged—had in intellectual circles in Britain at that time. In 1835, Jones was appointed by the Court of Directors of the East India Company to the chair of political economy and history at the East India College at Haileybury.<sup>59</sup> This appointment indicated that Richard Jones’s political economy had acquired a different kind of significance in contemporary Britain. Jones called his work a political economy of *nations*, which, I believe, made Jones important for an institution like the East India College at Haileybury. As it is well-known, the East India College was that pedagogical site where future administrators of British-India were educated in all those branches of knowledge which were considered as the intellectual backbone of governance. Political economy, as is evident, was one of the most important subjects in this curriculum of governance. Interestingly, this subject was taught at the East India College, as “political economy and history”, which shows that within the scheme of imperial governance, these two branches of knowledge were considered as

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<sup>56</sup>Mill pointed out that, “If philosophy shall ever discover these sequences, and it is making constant advances, all knowledge competent to human nature will be correctly summed up in a few propositions; and mistaken practice will be no longer possible.” Mill, “Theory and Practice”, 232.

<sup>57</sup>Whewell (ed.), *Literary Remains*, 1859, xxii.

<sup>58</sup>Jones’s active engagement with his contemporary political-economists has been documented in the following essays: Marchi and R. P. Sturges, “Malthus and Ricardo’s Inductivist Critics”, 379-393, C. J. Dewey, “The Rehabilitation of the Peasant Proprietor in Nineteenth-Century Economic Thought”, *History of Political Economy* 6, 1974, 17-47, and William L. Miller, “Richard Jones’s contribution to the theory of rent”, *History of Political Economy*, 9, Fall 1977, 346-65.

<sup>59</sup>He succeeded Malthus in this position.



necessarily interdependent. Also, such a mode of classification was almost naturally suited to Jones's work where, 'history' had a constitutive role to play in reconceptualizing political economy. For Jones, such intimate connections between his work, the East India College, and its way of classifying knowledge, remained life-long. He died in the college on 20 January 1855, and was buried in the neighbouring churchyard of Amwell.

On being appointed as the professor of political economy at King's College, London, Richard Jones gave a public lecture on what he considered to be the fundamental problem of this domain of knowledge. He argued, not surprisingly, that the main task of political economy was the analysis of "...*differences* in the productive power and operations of different nations."<sup>60</sup> Political economy, as was commonly understood, produced knowledge of the laws governing production and distribution of wealth. Jones emphasized that although, temporally speaking, production preceded distribution, analytically considered the latter should be the core area of inquiry in political economy. The mode of distribution—of the surplus produce of the soil—was embedded in the different forms of property ownership in different nations. These proprietary relations, in turn, expressed the organizing principle of political power in every society. Jones declared these linkages in unequivocal terms. The distribution of produce, in the form of property, he noted, "...has served, in the great majority of instances, to establish the first rude framework of political society. We see wealth, and the mode of its distribution, assuming an active influence, in creating the ties which bind the body politic together, and determine, by their form and complication, its character, and often its resources."<sup>61</sup>

This exposition, I argue, signalled the first coherent reinterpretation of political economy in the light of the "political" in nineteenth century Britain. By the "political", I mean the constitutive linkage between property and political power that gradually came out as the epistemological point of departure for political-economic analysis. Its universality was a hidden assumption in Ricardo. In Malthus, it came out as *difference*, between England and "Eastern nations", only to be flattened out in an unexplained manner by the Ricardian universality of "rent". The analytical significance of the "political" was teased out in the debates over "theory" and "practice", which took place between political-economists who *claimed* to be

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<sup>60</sup>Whewell (ed.), *Literary Remains*, 552, emphasis mine.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid, 554

methodological enemies of each other. It is this debate, I will contend, that sharpened the articulations of the “political”, by forcing Ricardians like McCulloch, to admit it as the basis of political-economic knowledge. McCulloch’s admission was, however, also a moment of contraction in the universal potential of political economy; the moment of its expansion came soon with James Mill’s rewriting of Ricardianism in the light of the relationship between landed property and political power in British India.

Richard Jones’s work, I argue, broke away from the available epistemological casting of political economy. Jones located the “political” at its heart. He gave the “political” a theoretical status, by acknowledging its fundamentally constitutive function with regard to political-economic categories. James Mill had also taken into account the “political” quite extensively when commenting on the conditions of British India. But Mill’s works did not contain an explicit conceptual foregrounding of the “political”. They remained wedded to Ricardo’s formulations, in which the “political” was invisible. Thus the way Richard Jones articulated the “political” was unprecedented.

This linkage between a mode of property ownership and the framework of political power which sustained it, argued Jones, structured the sphere of “distribution” in political economy. He insisted that that it should be considered as analytically prior to the sphere of “production”. Here was his crucial critique of contemporary political-economic frameworks, especially the dominant Ricardian one. Ricardo understood the sphere of “distribution” as consisting of a tripartite division of the produce into “rent”, “wage”, and “profit”, between landlords, capitalist farmers, and agricultural labourers respectively. The temporal assumption here was that distribution of the produce could take place only *after* its production. The universality of this temporal sequence was, however, dependent upon a crucial analytical excision of “distribution” from the temporality of a narrative where production is located as an absolute, pristine point of beginning. The problem with the narrative’s internal logic of temporality is that its imagined autonomy of “production” as a transcendental point of origin sat awkwardly with its general characterization of the relation between “production” and “distribution”.

It was assumed in Ricardo’s work, that this *relation* between production and distribution was universal. The variation was only that “...in different stages of society, the proportions of the whole produce of the earth which will be allotted to

each of these classes, under the name of rent, profit and wages, will be essentially different...”<sup>62</sup> But at the same time, Ricardo’s theory of rent stated that “rent” as a proportion of the produce distinct from “profits” and “wages” can arise only at an advanced state of cultivation, with the gradual extension of cultivation beyond the most fertile lands. It is only when cultivation was pushed to inferior soils that “rent” as a measure of differential natural fertility of soil emerged as a separately identifiable proportion of the produce. At an early stage of cultivation, when fertile land was abundant, Ricardo noted, “there will be no rent; for no one would pay for the use of land, when there was an abundant quantity not yet appropriated, and, therefore, at the disposal of whosoever might choose to cultivate it.”<sup>63</sup> If the division of the sphere of distribution into “rent”, “profit”, and “wage” was an universal one, as argued by Ricardo, then what did the sphere of “distribution” consist of when there was no “rent”? The framework of property itself—within which ‘distribution’ took place as ‘rent’, ‘profit’, and ‘wage’—disappeared at this point in Ricardo’s analysis. Ricardo seemed to suggest that this was a temporality of pure “production”, uncontained by the shackles of “distribution”, which his general framework, where “production” and “distribution” were necessarily interrelated, did not allow.

In fact, Ricardo’s entire analytical framework collapsed as it was embedded in such an inconsistent and self-destructive temporality. Rahul Govind in a recent essay has brilliantly argued this point. According to Ricardo, the price of produce of the marginal land, which did not pay rent, determined the rate of “profit”, which, in turn, determined “rent”. But for the rate of profit to get determined from the marginal land, Govind notes, there had to be a market, which also meant that since this was the last land, produce from earlier lands must have reached the market. But how is that possible, Govind asks, given that only the last land’s produce can determine the rate of profit, and rent? Let us see what Govind has to say about the contradiction this leads to.

“...1) other lands yielding rent having acquired a surplus from/over the market price/rate of profit (before their determination) when their produce is brought to the market/sold; 2) other lands are not yielding rent since they are awaiting such a determination, hence they cannot bring their produce to the market and therefore

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<sup>62</sup>Ricardo, *On the Principles of Political Economy and Taxation*, v.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid, 46.

neither can the “last land” do so. How is the rate of profit of the marginal land itself determined and what is the temporal/logical medium through which it can be determined?...This requires a miracle and thus we have the immaculate conception of the market.”<sup>64</sup>

Without such immaculate conceptions, Ricardian political economy, I argue, could not sustain itself in terms of the narrative temporality it was inscribed in. The pure temporality of “production”, as I have shown, was yet another example of this.

For Jones, however, the temporality of “production” and “distribution” remained unified, at all times and in all places. Production, Jones argued, was already-always imbricated in distribution. In fact, in the Jonesian scheme of things, it was the mode of distribution which organized production, and, therefore, made the category of production itself contingent—differently shaped according to different modes of distribution. As I have argued earlier, the sphere of “distribution”, according to Jones, was the framing of property forms by political power. Instead of calling this ensemble, “distribution”, in a typically political-economic vein, I have chosen to call it the “political”, because it brought back the category of “power” to political economy in a way which transformed this field of inquiry. The “political” in Jones was also that principle which produced, arranged, and distributed relations between different groups of the society. It was the container of the “social”. In his king’s College lecture, he traced the operations of the “political” in the following manner.

“Labour, continuously bestowed upon the soil”, Jones noted, “supposes property in the soil to be established.”<sup>65</sup> Further, he pointed out that “property in the soil almost universally rests, at one time of a people’s career, either in the general government, or in persons deriving their interest from it.”<sup>66</sup> It is this primary relation of property—between owners and cultivators of the soil—which, Jones noted, “practically bind together different ranks in all the regions of the world.”<sup>67</sup> From this point, Jones started outlining the emergence of different relations over time in

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<sup>64</sup>Rahul Govind, “Revenue, rent...profit? Early British Imperialism, political economy and the search for a *differentia specifica (inter se)*”, *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 48, 2, 2011, 194. I believe that what I have described as inconsistencies in the temporal narrative of Ricardo is called a “logical historicity” by Govind. He describes it as a “...matrix that is “simultaneously” diachronic and synchronic.” (p 195)

<sup>65</sup>Whewell (ed.), *Literary Remains*, 553.

<sup>66</sup>Ibid.

<sup>67</sup>Ibid.

different nations, out of these primary ones. As he had pointed out earlier, they determined the conditions and capacities of production in these nations. This was certainly a hierarchical scheme, although Jones remained cautious about extolling the virtues of advancement.<sup>68</sup> He began with “Asiatic nations”, where the primary division of the surplus was between the sovereign, his officers, and the cultivators. The non-agricultural populations in these nations, he argued, were paid by the sovereign from this surplus. Coming to eastern European nations, he noted that similar relations persisted between the bondsmen, the nobility, and the non-agricultural classes. As he came to countries of Western Europe, particularly England, he argued that there was a notable difference in the structure of these relations. This change in the “political”, or the assemblage of proprietary relations and political power, strikingly affected, and improved the conditions under which production took place, or, in Jones’s words, “the management and productiveness of labour”<sup>69</sup>.

The change was primarily signified by the arrival of the capitalists, as an intermediate class between proprietors and labourers, both agricultural and non-agricultural. He brings in his wake, “capital”, which Jones defined as “accumulated wealth with a view to profit”.<sup>70</sup> This distinct portion of wealth constitutes the fund from which labourers of all kinds receive their wages. This is how Jones explained the emergence of the specifically Ricardian sphere of distribution, marked by its tripartite division of wealth as “rent”, “wages”, and “profits”. In Jones’s political economy, therefore, the distribution of wealth amongst landlords, capitalists, and labourers—in one form of the “political” did not exclude its distribution in other forms also. Rather, he regarded this as conditional upon the “political”, explaining it differently under different articulations. Thus, Jones explained “rent”, “profits”, and “wages” in all those countries where the capitalists had not yet appeared in a different way, as produced by the particular relations between proprietors, labourers, and non-agricultural classes, i.e., by the varying formations of the “political”. The structuring logic of the “political”, however, as Jones emphasized, remained strong even after the significant change introduced by “capital”. Within the same logic, old forms gave way

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<sup>68</sup>“After surveying the different steps and stages of the changes I have been speaking of, we shall see at once that England is much in advance of other nations. I do not by this phrase mean to take it for granted, that her position is better than theirs, but only to point out, that in arriving at our present position, we have passed through and gone beyond those at which we see other nations stationary, or through which we see them moving.” Ibid, 557-8.

<sup>69</sup>Whewell (ed.), *Literary Remains*, 557.

<sup>70</sup>Ibid, 556.

to new ones. In Jones's opinion, "The ties which formerly bound the community together are worn out and fall to pieces; other bonds, other principles of cohesion connect its different classes."<sup>71</sup>

Jones's "inductive" political economy, and its hierarchy of nations, was undoubtedly rooted in historical determinism. But he was less interested in its grand teleological implications. Political economy's task, he believed, did not consist in predicting the future on the basis of a common temporality of progress for all nations. Jones clearly pointed out that, "The future of all other people will, however, at some time, be like our present. Be it so...but still the interest we have in the future, however great, can but be a subordinate interest after all."<sup>72</sup> Contemporary political-economists, Jones believed, suffered from the assumption of a single future for the entire world. This prevented them from looking at the world around them in its own terms, in the light of different histories and different presents. By focusing solely on their own conditions, these people believed, that "...if we do not get a knowledge of the phenomena which the rest of the people of the earth present to the philosopher as his materials, we shall at least get a knowledge of a state of things, which will one day be theirs and is destined to be universal."<sup>73</sup> Such blinkered futurism, Jones argued, doomed political economy to false generalizations based on gross ignorance. The world, Jones argued, was not going to erase its differences and become one in any conceivable future. Change would be slow and extremely imperceptible. This approach, therefore, would provide political economy with no analytical means to look at the world as it was, and explain the various conditions of livelihood existing in it.

History primarily inspired Jones as an explanatory principle of political economy. It explained the present of all nations. Political economy, Jones argued, could establish general principles only on the basis of a rigorous observation of "facts". For this, he noted, "...there are open to us two sources of knowledge,—history and statistics, the story of the past, and a detail of the present condition of the nations of the earth."<sup>74</sup> These two modes of knowledge constituted the analytical "eye" of "inductivism" in political economy. While "history", during Jones's time, had become accepted as a legitimate mode of knowledge, "statistics" had not. Jones

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<sup>71</sup>Ibid, 557.

<sup>72</sup>Ibid, 559.

<sup>73</sup>Ibid, 558-9.

<sup>74</sup>Ibid, 570.

remained emphatic about its use in political economy. He argued for its systematization, and urged for the formation of statistical societies in England.<sup>75</sup> In one of his letters to Whewell, he also mentioned his plan of proposing the formation of a statistical society to the British Association for the Advancement of Science. The society, he noted, should deal with various kinds of statistics. He enlisted them as: “Economical statistics...Political Statistics...Legal Statistics...Finance...Medical Statistics...Moral & Intellectual statistics...Ecclesiastical statistics...”<sup>76</sup>

Such was Richard Jones’s political-economic vision. I will argue that he effected a major re-writing of the contemporary articulations of this field of knowledge. His political economy was historical, statistical, and even ethnographic. He was not beyond the evolutionist universalism of his times. But, from within that, he engendered a framework which hooked the epistemological foundations of political economy to what I have called the “political”. He made political economy look more like a comparative political sociology of nations. What Jones and Whewell posited in this rewriting as “inductivism”, or the championing of “facts” over abstract “theory”, I will argue, can be more productively interpreted as a theoretical reconfiguration and a methodological diversification of political economy. As I intend to demonstrate gradually, such changes in the object and texture of knowledge in this area, need to be examined simultaneously with the field of agrarian governance in early-nineteenth century British India.

### **Where the “political” began: rent**

It has been shown in the previous sections that rent was one of the central categorial markers of this radical redefinition of political economy. This section will closely document the manner in which the category of rent carved out the field of the “political” in Jones’s political economy. Richard Jones pointed out that it is the conditions within which human labour operated that determined the precise nature of rents, wages, and profits and, thereby, the laws of production and distribution of

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<sup>75</sup>“It is not pleasant to reflect how little has been done in England to systematize statistical inquiries or to preserve and spread the information that statistics can give us...We may hope surely, that mankind and their concerns will soon attract interest enough to receive similar attention; and that a statistical society will be added to the number of those which are advancing the scientific knowledge of England.” Ibid, 571.

<sup>76</sup>“Richard Jones to William Whewell, February 18 1834”, No. 60, *Whewell Papers*, Wren Library, Trinity College, Cambridge, Add. Mss. C 52.

wealth.<sup>77</sup> These conditions, he argued, were structured by an assemblage of property and political power, and were different throughout the world. He argued that the different forms of distribution of wealth equate with different shares of incomes generated from land. Thus, he noted, that “If that soil belongs to others, this circumstance alone makes the peasants at once tributary to the proprietors, and a portion of the produce is distributed as *Rent*. If besides the soil other things are needful to facilitate their exertions, to the owner of these things another part of the produce must be resigned, and hence the origin of *Profits*. The share of the labourer, the reward of mere personal exertion, in whatever shape, or manner, or time, it may be received, constitute the *Wages* of labour...”<sup>78</sup>

Jones went on to document a variety of rents existing in different parts of the world. He described them as labour, metayer, cottier, ryot, and farmer’s rents. He traced the origin of each of these to the different histories of the nations in which they existed. Jones argued that not only rents, but also wages and profits were expressions of relations of power around land. These relations conditioned the efficiency of labour, thereby dictating production of wealth, in general. In the case of labour rents, for example, Jones stated that landed proprietors allotted a portion of their estate to cultivators, from which the latter were supposed to draw their subsistence. In exchange, as rent for that land, they were to provide their labour to the proprietors. Jones argued that such a relationship between the proprietor and cultivator of land had ruinous consequences on the conditions of labour: “The industry of serfs, then, is found to be neither continuous, skilful, nor powerfully aided;...The peasant who depends for his food upon his labour in his own allotment of ground, and is yet liable to be called away at the discretion and convenience of another person to work upon other lands, in the produce of which he is not to share, is naturally a reluctant labourer.”<sup>79</sup> In this way, Jones explained “rent”, in each case, as an articulation of a particular calculus of power between proprietors and cultivators of land. As he developed his explanation of “rent”, he candidly dismissed Ricardo’s. He remarked:

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<sup>77</sup>Jones observed that, “...the labourer is rarely in a condition to retain the whole produce of his exertions. In whatever state of society he exists, some tie, or some want, makes him to a certain extent dependent upon others. Those who constitute the larger proportion of the labouring class throughout the world...are obliged therefore to raise it with their own hands from the soil...” Jones, *An Essay on the Distribution of Wealth*, 2.

<sup>78</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>79</sup>“A Short Tract on Political Economy including some Account of the Anglo-Indian Revenue Systems” in *Literary Remains*, ed. Whewell, 199.



“The necessity then, which compels them to pay a rent, it need hardly be observed, is wholly independent of any difference in the quality of the ground they occupy, and would not be removed were the soils all equalized.”<sup>80</sup>

Ryot rents, Jones argued, were peculiar to Asia. Jones described “ryots” as “hereditary occupiers”, having attributes of both tenants and proprietors. He pointed out that, “They are proprietors, inasmuch as they are unquestionably and incontestably entitled to possess, and to transmit to their children, the soil which they cultivate. They are tenants, inasmuch as they have rarely a beneficial interest in the soil; or inasmuch as they have to pay rent.”<sup>81</sup> Jones traced the origin of these rents to an Asiatic mode of governance, and their present condition to administrative arrangements of the British government. Like James Mill, Jones also argued that Asiatic sovereigns used to be supreme landlords. But he drew a different sketch of India’s “political”. Unlike Mill, he did not view the ancient Asiatic state as the exclusive site of the “political”. In other words, while analyzing ryot rents, he did not think that the Asiatic state could be perceived as the unambiguous embodiment of the particular complex of proprietary relations and political power these rents were embedded in. In Jones’s understanding, India’s “political” was less centralized than what Mill thought it to be. Jones depicted it as a much more diffused and dispersed arena of power. In his scheme, the “political” in India looked like a *mélange* of various kinds of landholders and landholding bodies. Rent was a transaction which defined this complex, and determined the overlapping yet separate jurisdictions of power. I will discuss this power-complex in greater detail in the chapter on property and agrarian governance in British India. This is because the way administrative practice defined, maintained, and governed landed-property in India had remarkable similarities with Jones’s definition of the ‘political’. But such linkages can be explored only in the upcoming chapters within a more contextualized discussion of agrarian governance.

Jones himself argued that within his political economy the chief expression of this “political” is rent. He emphasized that, “We may be prepared...to see without surprise, the different systems of rents which...have arisen out of the peculiar circumstances of different people, forming the main ties which hold society together, determining the nature of the connection between the governing part of the

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<sup>80</sup>Ibid, 11.

<sup>81</sup>Whewell (ed.), *Literary Remains*, 211.

community and the governed, and stamping on a very large portion of the population of the whole globe their most striking features, social, political, and moral...”<sup>82</sup> In a certain sense, therefore, for Jones, “rent” determined all aspects of a society, of the character of a nation; it was an organic expression of the “political”.

### Conclusion

This was the world of political economy in early-nineteenth century Britain in which a critical epistemological reorientation took place with the ascendancy of the “political”. As I have argued in chapter one, this opened up a novel horizon for the meaning of labour, as production, which was, according to Foucault, the constitutive category of the discourse of political economy during this period. As the Modern episteme replaced the Classical one, Foucault notes, production replaced exchange as the object of knowledge. At the level of the structure of discourse, the equivalence of representation was substituted by the organicity of the unrepresentable. Labour stood as that elemental, irreducible, origin from where political economy began.<sup>83</sup>

It is here, at the very moment of the foundation of this political economy, that labour, as production, was redefined, in the light of the “political”, as local/indigenous power. This was a profound transformation at the level of the object of knowledge of political economy. It meant that labour, as production, will be henceforth defined as conditioned by the different interlocking arrangements of property and political power in different nations. This chapter argues that Ricardo and Ricardians like Malthus and McCulloch tried to render this question invisible, by putting forward a universal political-economic framework, defined by immaculate conceptions, like the pure temporality of production, or naturalist determinants of production, like land as divine monopoly. Questions of power were posited as outside the legitimate analytical domain of political economy, as McCulloch emphasized that slave-labour in the West Indies, or peasant tributes in Eastern nations could not be classified as wages or rents. But with Mill, Jones, Whewell, and, as I will show in a later chapter, J.S. Mill,

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<sup>82</sup>Ibid, 4.

<sup>83</sup>“...on the horizon of all actual representations, as the foundation of their unity, is found to be those never objectifiable objects, those never entirely representable representations, those simultaneously evident and invisible visibilities, those realities that are removed from reality to the degree to which they are the foundation of what is given to us and reaches us: the force of labour, the energy of life, the power of speech....the conditions of possibility of experience are being sought in the conditions of possibility of the objects and its existence...” Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, New York, 1994, (1970), 243.

local/indigenous forms of power were perceived as key constituents of a more universalized political economy.

In a sense, this was to make political economy sociological. To grasp its significance at another level, I argue, it will be necessary to see how similar processes were at work in the governance of quotidian agrarian affairs in British India during this period. The upcoming chapters will bring out the rationalities immanent in a range of governmental practices across a variety of localities in British India. I will argue that the “political”, as an assemblage of property and political power, also underpinned agrarian governance in British India, but in a transformed manner. This transformation, which I call the “local”, stood for an analytical framework which classified localities on the basis of complex spatio-temporal interconstitutivities, rallying around an original, indigenous form of the “political”. The next chapter will begin where this one ended. It will take a plunge into the agrarian affairs of early-nineteenth century British India by tracking the career of rent—one of its chief governmental categories, which was also the gateway of the “political”.

## Chapter Three

### The regulator of agrarian power: rent

Cuttack was the nineteenth division of Bengal Presidency. In 1837, East India Company's government began the first land survey and settlement of Cuttack. The land revenue assessment of the division had been done earlier also. But things were markedly different this time. The government seemed to be occupying every nook and corner of the agrarian landscape of Cuttack. In every village, on every plot of land, there were men of the government. They came with questions. They also came with machines. They measured land, decided disputes between villagers over boundaries of fields, asked about the rates of different types of land, the crops, the cows, looked for deeds of ownership, and held assemblies with the headmen of villages, zemindars, talookdars, and cultivators of various kinds. The proceedings of the Collectorates in Cuttack, of the Bengal government, and of the India Office records, suggest unequivocally that there was quite a crowd in the villages of Cuttack in these years. This chapter marks the beginning of a search in the bye-lanes of these crowded places. It tries to find out what governance was looking for in the agrarian territory of Cuttack during this period. Instead of looking at quotidian practices of governance as an infinite range of contingent, on-the-spot, pragmatic, reactive, and arbitrary decisions<sup>1</sup>, the chapter assembles a firm epistemological matrix as the structuring logic of the diversity. In developing this matrix, I walk along the trail set up in the previous chapter by reorientations in political economy in early-nineteenth century Britain. I interpret agrarian governance in British India during this period as a particular articulation of political economy—one that I have described in the former chapter as the “political”. I demonstrate how the “political”—a bundle of property and political power—got fashioned as the primary object of agrarian governance in British India. In this chapter the demonstration begins with the category of rent.

Over six sections, the chapter argues that rent was one of the pivotal markers of the “political” in British India in the first half of the nineteenth century. In

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<sup>1</sup>For some typical examples of such a reading of agrarian governance, see Thomas R. Metcalf, *Land, Landlords, and the British Raj: Northern India in the Nineteenth Century*, Berkeley, 1979, J. Rosselli, “Theory and Practice in North India”, *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 8, 2, 1971, 134-63, and Neil Rabinoy, “System v. Expediency: The Reality of Land Revenue Administration in the Bombay Presidency 1812-1820”, *Modern Asian Studies*, 9, 4, 1975, 529-46.

following the political-economic/governmental career of rent, I travel in and out of Cuttack, through times before and after the settlement. Cuttack was an anomalous zone in the world of British Indian agrarian governance. It was one of those areas which, despite being a part of the Bengal Presidency, never got governed by what has been typically and hastily identified in the historiography as the shorthand for agrarian governance in Bengal, namely, the policy of Permanent Settlement. In terms of agrarian governance, Cuttack, I argue, stood forth as a complex site where governmental practices of other regions jostled as overlapping, contradictory, and interconstitutive forces. As an agrarian locality, therefore, its history has to be envisioned as a necessarily intertwined one, connected and disjointed at the same time, written simultaneously with histories of other regions. The nature of these connections will be studied in greater detail in the next chapter. This chapter focuses on myriad articulations of rent across a range of administrative sites. It argues that the category of rent, in all these sites, instead of being perceived as a sign of the productive capacity of soil, was deployed as a marker of the domain of the “political”. It was debated and developed as the most important historical trace of the different kinds of proprietary power in British India. Rent was used to understand the particular forms of interrelations between property and political power operative in different localities. It was defined as that crucial transaction which held these relationships together. It was viewed as one of the most important regulators of agrarian power.<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, over the first half of nineteenth century, the regulation of rent was set up as one of the major tasks of agrarian governance. This chapter shows how various strategies were devised to carefully map, supervise, and control rent. The following chapters will demonstrate how the “political”, in a transformed manner, as the “local” emerged as the general object of agrarian governance in British India. In this chapter,

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<sup>2</sup>A notable exception in the interpretations of the governmental deployment of “rent”, which does not fall back upon a pragmatist reading, but at the same time differs from Stokes’s exclusively Ricardian understanding of the category can be found in Peter Robb’s work on the politics of tenancy legislation in late nineteenth century Bihar. Robb notes, in the context of the debates over the tenancy legislation of the 1880s, “On rent, the reformers rejected an untrammelled role for the market and for competition on better soils, and argued for political intervention to fix levels which would secure a sufficiency of income to the tenants. For their theory, they preferred Jones to Malthus or Ricardo. Rent was regarded not as the necessary expression of economic factors creating a “net product”, but as a variable originally traced to power.” But Robb does not take Jones’s general reconceptualization of political economy as a possible interpretive entry-point to the foundations of agrarian governance, which, as I argue in this dissertation, were laid much earlier in the nineteenth century. Peter Robb, *Ancient Rights and Future Comfort: Bihar, the Bengal Tenancy Act of 1885 and British Rule in India*, London, 1997, 197.

therefore, I show how rent was conceived as both the entry-point into, and the defining element of, the “political”.

### **A topography of the “political”: Bengal, “local” and the 5<sup>th</sup> Report**

The earliest presentation to the British Parliament of a comprehensive discussion on revenue-administration in British-India was made in the 5<sup>th</sup> *Report from the Select Committee of East India Affairs* in 1812. The report discussed matters of revenue-administration as part of a general critique of the Bengal Code, namely, the Cornwallis-inspired model of administration, which was established in Bengal in 1793. The policy of a permanent zemindary settlement constituted the land-revenue policy, and, therefore, the core of the “Bengal Code”.

Through a detailed discussion of the operation of the Bengal Code in different parts of the country, the report argued that it was ill-suited to several “local” conditions. Next, the report discussed a number of alternative administrative arrangements which were considered to be more sensitive to the “local” characteristics of different areas. I argue that the conceptual grid within which the critique of the Bengal Code was organized in the 5<sup>th</sup> Report was the category of the “local”. The “local”, which explained changes in revenue-administration, was an expression of difference in tenures, or proprietary rights in land. It established an entire spectrum of hierarchized difference over which the problematic<sup>3</sup> of land-tenures was distributed. I will argue that the epistemological basis of this hierarchized difference was political-economic. The “local” signified *difference* in the arrangements of property and political power, distributed over a range of geographical localities. It represented varying configurations of the “political”. It established the “political” as the object of agrarian governance. Practices of governance adopted the “local” as a spatio-temporal frame within which the particulars of the “political” got distributed as a range of landholders and landholding bodies, fashioning an entire matrix of power flowing out of proprietary relations. This is how, I argue, agrarian

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<sup>3</sup>I use the term problematic in an Althusserian sense throughout the chapter. Althusser defines “problematic” as that which brings out within a given ideological formation, “...the system of questions commanding the answers given by the ideology”. Althusser argues that it is through the problematic that every ideological formation structures its unity. Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster, London, 1977 (1969), 67.

governance remained grounded within the assumptions of a particular form of political-economy—one that was rewritten by the “political” in early-nineteenth century Britain.

In exploring the “local”, the 5<sup>th</sup> Report used rent to demarcate the domain of proprietary power. The proprietary-forms it ended up excavating will be taken up in the next chapter. In this chapter, I will discuss how rent was used to open up interrelations between property and political power. The 5<sup>th</sup> Report was perhaps the earliest and most systematic example of this analytical operation. It pointed out that in India, the ryots, or the peasant cultivators, held the most authentic form of proprietary right in land. This property-right existed in the most ancient times, when the country was ruled by a Hindu sovereign. Since then, through the oppressive period of Muslim rule, a successively corrupt gradation of property rights emerged in India. The property rights of “village headmen”, and “chief cultivators”, evident in Benares, and that of the “zemindars”, found in the permanently-settled areas of Bengal were instances of those corrupt forms.

The report tried to prove the existence of property rights during ancient times in India from a discussion of land-tenures in the Presidency of Fort St. George. For example, it noted about Malabar and Canara that, “The lands in general appear to have constituted a clear private property, more ancient, and probably more perfect, than that of England. The tenure, as well as the transfer, of this property, by descent, sale, gift, and mortgage, is fortified by a series of regular deeds...”<sup>4</sup> The Report emphasized that along with alienable rights, it was a landlord’s rent which proved the existence of private property in land. It pointed out that the government assessment under Hindu rule was moderate enough to leave this rent with the owner of the land. But, “...the increase which that assessment underwent at different times, during the Mahommedan government at Mysore, was so great...The landlords had so little rent left to them, after rendering their public dues, as to be mostly unable to subsist upon it...”<sup>5</sup> Evidently, the Report suggested that without the existence of rent there ceased to be a property in land.

Existence of private property in land was defined in similar terms with regard to the Meerassadars, or the main tenure-holders of Jaghire. The Report mentioned

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<sup>4</sup>“The Fifth Report from the Select Committee on the Affairs of the East India Company”, *P.P.*, 1812, 130.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid*, 132.

that, "...they possess a real property in the land, having the right of mortgaging, selling, and otherwise disposing of it..."<sup>6</sup> In discussing the oppressions of Muslim rule in the region, the Report stated, "Where the demand of government was so high as to have absorbed nearly the whole of the landlord's rent...the land naturally ceased to be either a mortgageable or saleable commodity; but even in that case, if the meerassadar did not cultivate the land himself...he was entitled to receive from the cultivator a russoom, or quit rent, in acknowledgment of his proprietary right..."<sup>7</sup>

The *5<sup>th</sup> Report* articulated, quite forcefully, the question of tenures or proprietary right as the chief concern of revenue-administration in British-India. Like James Mill, the *5<sup>th</sup> Report* also deployed rent as a historical clue to the "political" in India. That is, both used rent to posit a particular enmesh of property and political power as the authentic form of the "political" in India. But there was a crucial difference between the two articulations. Mill, through a reinterpreted Ricardianism, argued that the state in India was ultimately the universal landlord, irrespective of the ryots' quasi-proprietary rights over the soil. Thus, it could legitimately extract the full rent as revenue, or land-tax. As I have shown in the previous chapter, Mill emphasized that this was consistent with a scientific, productive, political-economic form of taxation. But the report noted that rent-property was retained in designing revenue-administration in this Presidency. "At an early period of British administration, it appears that the share of the produce received by the landlords as rent, was about fifteen per cent, and that which belonged to the tenant, 57 or 58 per cent, leaving the remainder, about twenty-four per cent, as the land tax or public demand..."<sup>8</sup> As it is evident, the report implied that the field of the "political" in India was forged by several landholders, or landholding bodies. The Company's government, therefore, allowed the rent to be distributed in different portions over this dispersed field. In the representations of the *5<sup>th</sup> Report*, therefore, rent was considered something more than and different from a value emerging solely from differential fertility of land. It was seen as that part of the produce, that income from land which, in being distributed amongst different landholders, defined, and held together the dispersed domain of the "political". In this manner, the "political" was inaugurated in the *5<sup>th</sup> Report* as a decisive threshold of difference with respect to a certain variant of

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid, 136.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid, 132.



political economy, namely the Ricardian one. It set in motion a dynamic field of interpretive possibilities, centred on the issue of proprietary power.

### **Rent and the Permanent Settlement: a new analytic of power**

John Herbert Harington came to British-India as a writer in 1780, during the Governor-Generalship of Warren Hastings. His official career lasted for nearly half a century. Over this period he occupied several important judicial positions of the Company's government. He served variously as the Magistrate of Dinagepore, as the Register of Sudder Dewanny and Nizamat Adawlut, as a member of the Board of Revenue, and as the Judge of the Sudder Dewanny and Nizamat Adawlut.<sup>9</sup> His influential two-volume analysis of the Bengal Regulations used to function as a manual for all district officers in Bengal. Just before retirement, in 1827, Harington wrote a treatise on the question of tenures in Bengal. It was titled, "Minute and Draft of Regulation, of the Rights of Ryots in Bengal". It must be remembered that Harington's text was produced in an administrative milieu which was critical of the way the category of landed property had been treated during the Permanent Settlement of Bengal. The critique of Permanent Settlement was on the rise right from the first decade of the nineteenth century.<sup>10</sup> This critique was primarily invested in redefining the field of landed property, not only in Bengal, but also in other parts of British India, which were gradually coming under the Company's government.

It was being argued that the Permanent Settlement of Bengal had mistakenly established the zemindars, or big landlords, as the exclusive proprietors of the soil. In doing this it had swept away a great variety of proprietary rights possessed by different kinds of landholders.<sup>11</sup> Harington's essay, in the spirit of this critique, aimed

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<sup>9</sup>*Extracts from Harington's Analysis of the Bengal Regulations*, Calcutta, 1866, V.

<sup>10</sup>Right Honorable John Sullivan's note in the collection of evidence presented to the *House of Commons Select Committee on the affairs of East India Company* contained a systematic review of the several positions against Permanent Settlement. Written in 1832, the note mentioned that, "The preceding Administration at home had, in the years, 1801, 1802, 1804, and 1809 evinced a disposition more and more *adverse* to any early extension of the Bengal Permanent Settlement in the Madras possessions. A similar course had been pursued in the years 1810 and 1811, and the early part of 1812, as relating to the modern acquisitions of the Bengal side of India." "Observations on the Revenue Systems of India", by the Right Honorable John Sullivan, Appendix 8, Revenue, 51, *Report from the Select Committee on the Affairs of the East India Company; with minutes of evidence in six parts, and an appendix and index to each*, P.P., 1831-32.

<sup>11</sup>Lamenting the pernicious effects of this measure, Lord Moira, the Governor-General in 1815, noted that, "If it was the intention of our Regulations to deprive every class but the large proprietors who engaged with Government, of any share in the profits of the land, that effect has been accomplished in

at a redefinition of the category of landed property in the context of Bengal. His chief analytical tool in this exercise was rent. In this section I interpret this administrative articulation of property as a political-economic one. I suggest that the epistemological basis of rent in Harington's essay was what I have called in the previous chapter the "political" in political economy. Richard Jones perceived the fundamental constituents of political economy as conditioned by particular configurations of property and political power. The problematic of Jonesian political economy was, therefore, an assemblage of property and political power, which adopted different forms in different nations of the world. Even James Mill, as I demonstrated in the former chapter, upheld the "political", namely, a similar matrix of property and political power, as the problematic of political economy in applying a reinterpreted Ricardianism to British India. Most importantly, in both cases the category of rent was construed as one of the primary components of the architecture of the "political". Harington also, I argue, deployed rent as a political-economic category. He used it to explore the formations of the "political" in Bengal.

Harington's essay was a reinterpretation of the Permanent Settlement in the light of the category of rent. It reflected on the relationship between the zemindars and other landholders—primarily the ryots, but also others like dependent talookdars—in Bengal. Harington perceived all these landholders as possessing varying degrees of proprietary rights. More importantly, he pointed out that there were provisions in the regulations of the Permanent Settlement itself for the protection of these rights. But they were not clearly defined and enforced by the government. Harington argued that only a careful regulation of rent can ensure these rights. In this matrix of proprietary rights, the inferior ones were always under the threat of being destroyed by the superior ones. Harington saw rent as that political transaction, or vehicle of power, which defined proprietary rights by marking their boundaries, and therefore prescribing the limit at which they ceased to exist.<sup>12</sup>

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Bengal. No compensation can now be made for the injustice done to those who used to enjoy a share of those profits under the law of the Empire, and under institutions anterior to all records, for the transfer of their property to the Rajahs." "Minute by the Right hon. the Governor-General, on the Revenue Administration of the Presidency of Fort William, dated the 21<sup>st</sup> September 1815", *Report from the Select Committee on the Affairs of the East India Company*, Appendix 9, Revenue, 84.

<sup>12</sup>He noted that, "The causes, which have principally operated in producing insecurity and oppression to the peasants of Bengal..." were principally "...The omission of clear and definite rules in the Regulations of 1793, and subsequent years, for the declaring the rights and tenures of the ryots, whose rents were, in many instances, left to be adjusted by Pergunnah or other supposed local rates, no longer in existence, or ascertainable..." and "A want of due enforcement of rules, which were enacted on

Harington claimed that the systematic administration of rent had been one of the major concerns of the Permanent Settlement. By presenting extracts from the results of John Shore's investigation into the tenures of Bengal, which were supposed to be the basis of the Permanent Settlement, Harington suggested that rent, as the primary marker of property, was present at the heart of this measure of governance. According to Harington, John Shore insisted that a Permanent Settlement should be based on a precise and transparent regulation of rent payable by the ryots and other under-tenants to the zemindars. Shore wrote that, "...the Rents to be paid by the Ryots, by whatever rule or custom they may be demanded, shall be specific as to their amount. If by a Pottah, containing the Assul and Abwab, the amount of both shall be inserted in it...In every Mofussil Cutcherry, the Nirkbundy, or rates of land, shall be publicly recorded, and the Zemindar is answerable for enforcing this Regulation, under a penalty or fine for neglect, at the discretion of Government."<sup>13</sup> In this manner, Shore went on to recommend an entire infrastructure of regulation, distributed over the village, the Pergunnah and the headquarters of the Collectorate, which was supposed to record fixed rates of rents and govern justly their transactions between the landholders.

Harington regretted that this regulatory mechanism was not instituted during the Permanent Settlement. However, he pointed out, quoting the statement of another senior official, Mr. Colebrooke, that, "The power of making laws for the protection and welfare of the tenants, in the several classes of dependant Talookdars, Ryots, and other cultivators of the soil, was expressly reserved to Government, by an Article of a Proclamation enacted into Regulation I. of 1793; and Rules, with correspondent rates, may be sanctioned by Government..."<sup>14</sup> After concluding his minute, Harington put forward the various clauses of the Regulation he proposed for the protection of the rights of Ryots. The Regulation put together, in a summarized form, his opinions expressed in the minute. Its central focus was the matter of ascertainment of legitimate rents and modes of governing their fair operation. This was considered as the essential mechanism for protecting and maintaining all proprietary rights in land. The way it envisioned property in land—as a matrix of dispersed, overlapping, and

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concluding a Permanent Settlement with the Zemindars and other landholders, requiring them, within a fixed period, to adjust the rent of their tenants, and furnish them with Pottahs; the forms of which were to be approved by the Collectors." Harington, *Minute and Draft of Regulation*, 1.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid, 3.

<sup>14</sup>Harington, *Minute and Draft of Regulation*, 15.

conflicting rights between zemindars, and talookdars and ryots of different kinds—resounded the principles of Regulation VII of 1822.

This regulation, to which I turn in the next section, was a crucial legislative moment in early nineteenth-century agrarian governance. Harington openly appreciated its vision of property in land. He quoted in detail from the 9<sup>th</sup> Section of the Regulation, which laid bare this vision by prescribing rules for the governance of property. The section noted that the proceedings of the government officers involved in settling the land-revenue, “...shall embrace the formation of as accurate a record as possible, of all local usages connected with landed tenures, as full as practicable a specification of all persons enjoying the possession and property of the soil, or vested with any heritable or transferable interest in the land, or the rents of it; care being taken to distinguish the different modes of possession and property; and the real nature and extent of the interests held, more specially where several persons may hold interests in the same subject, matter of different kinds or degrees...”<sup>15</sup>

Harington’s perception of rent was not completely severed from the Ricardian explanation of the category. He did argue that even the “pergunnah rates” or other “local rates” had some basis in the varying fertility of soil. However, in the complete constitution of the payment called “rent”, various other customary tributes, in the name of Abwab and Khurcheh, came into play. But for Harington, the relations of property and political power in which rent was embedded were of far greater analytical significance than the differential fertility of soil, which was merely a marginal empirical aspect of the category. In Harington’s text, rent functioned as a political-economic category only in so far as it signified the “political” or, the core of power relations between different proprietors of the land. For Harington, rent was not only an entry-point into the matrix of property and political power; it was that political-economic threshold beyond which the category of property vanished. In other words, as long as superior landholders took a legitimate rent from subordinate landholders, the field of property, defined by varying degrees of rights over land, remained in existence. Accordingly, he argued that the aim of agrarian governance should be the maintenance of this field of proprietary power, and protection of all kinds of rights residing in it. A careful mapping and regulation of rent was thought to be the key strategy towards this end.

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid, 29.

### **The early legislative career of rent**

Regulation VII of 1822 comprised of a new plan for the land-revenue settlement of the Ceded and Conquered Provinces and the temporarily-settled areas of the Bengal Presidency, including Cuttack. Harington had indicated that the principles of this regulation shared his formulation of the relation between rent and proprietary rights. Ascertainment of proprietary-rights was, undoubtedly, the central focus of this regulation. Its opening lines were: "...in revising the existing settlement, the efforts of the Revenue-officers should be chiefly directed not to any general and extensive enhancement of the jama, but to the objects equalizing the public burthens, and of ascertaining, settling and recording the rights, interests, privileges and properties of all persons and classes owning, occupying, managing or cultivating the land, or gathering or disposing of its produce, or collecting or appropriating the rent or revenue payable on account of land..."<sup>16</sup> Determination of an entire gamut of proprietary rights in land had, by now, become the unequivocal objective of agrarian governance in British-India. In the achievement of this objective, however, rent remained a crucial analytical tool. It continued to function as the principal reflector of the "political".

Holt Mackenzie, the chief architect of this regulation, held opinions similar to James Mill on the relationship between rent and the assemblage of property and political power. He adhered to the contemporary political-economic definition of rent, and also to Mill's interpretation of the state as the general landlord in India, entitled to the full rent. In a letter to the Select Committee of the House of Commons, he noted that in India "the existence of private rights, limiting the right of government, so as to leave to the owners of the fields a portion of the rent, that is, a share of the surplus which remains, after paying wages and replacing stock, seems to have been rarely established..."<sup>17</sup> Mackenzie further pointed out that, "few instances are to be found of individuals enjoying rent separately from the profits of tillage, excepting under some

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<sup>16</sup>F.G. Wigley (ed.), *The Eastern Bengal and Assam Code, In Three Volumes Containing the Regulations and Local Acts in Force in the Province of Eastern Bengal and Assam, Vol. 1*, Calcutta, 1907, 177.

<sup>17</sup>"Letter from the Right Honorable Holt McKenzie", *Report from the Select Committee on the Affairs of the East India Company*, 300.

express grant or contract with Government. The Government, in short, was the great rent-owner...”<sup>18</sup>

But unlike James Mill, Mackenzie did not believe that this government did, or should, assume the same principle in fixing the assessment. He emphasized that, “It was not indeed the intention of our Government to enforce its full rights. It was generally allowed that the interest of the country must suffer if it were attempted to draw the entire rent into the exchequer...still more with reference to the risk of taxing, and restricting production by an excessive assessment on the part of Government, as the general landlord, it was expedient to leave to individuals a valuable property in this land, whether permanent rights of property were admitted or not.”<sup>19</sup>

It is to be noted that Mackenzie argued in favour of keeping *a* property, distinguishing this from “permanent rights of property”. He envisioned this proprietary right as a restricted kind, dependent on the payment of a certain portion of the rent. As a witness to the Select Committee, Mackenzie was asked how such proprietary rights in favour of ryots could be recovered in Bengal, the land of the ruinous policy of the Permanent Settlement. In reply, Mackenzie stated that,

“In cases in which it may appear that the legal demand of the zemindar is such as to leave a valuable property to the ryot, the object will be accomplished by the full ascertainment and due record of the fact; but in other, probably in the majority of cases, I am afraid it may be found that in strictness the legal demand of the zemindar is such as, if actually enforced, would leave the ryots’ right of occupancy of no value; for the rates nominally existing will often be found excessive if applied to the land accurately measured; and in the absence of established money rates, the ordinary measure of the government revenue is stated at one half of the gross produce, which I apprehend would generally swallow up all rent.”<sup>20</sup>

Mackenzie argued, like Harington, that the regulation of rent was absent in Bengal, which resulted in a destruction of proprietary rights in land. This allowed the superior landholders, or the zemindars, to usurp that restricted proprietary right which the government intended to maintain amongst the inferior landholders, or

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<sup>18</sup>Ibid, 301.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid.

<sup>20</sup>“Examination of Witnesses, Holt McKenzie, April 18, 1832”, *Report from the Select Committee on the Affairs of the East India Company*, 226.

cultivators.<sup>21</sup> He pointed out that the zemindars destroyed that proprietary right by extracting the full rent.<sup>22</sup> Thus, Mackenzie pointed out that a settlement, "...embraced two great branches of inquiry; first, *the relation of the people to each other and to the government*; and, secondly the extent of productiveness of the land, ...The first branch of inquiry has been almost wholly neglected...It was yet the branch of inquiry that most demanded attention, both because, to maintain the rights of the people is the main object of all government, and because, in it, inaccuracy is fatal to utility..."<sup>23</sup>

It can be seen clearly that although Mackenzie adhered to the Ricardian definition of rent, as the surplus over profits of cultivation and wages of labour, he located its political-economic function in the realm of the "political". That is why he viewed the settlement of rent as an exercise in exploring, disaggregating, and governing a web of relations between the state and various kinds of landholders—relations constituting a complex of property and political power, or the "political". Like Harington, once again, he did not neglect the link between rent and productiveness of soil. But he insisted that the task of settling the domain of power-relations embodied by rent was much-neglected and needed urgent attention. Unlike Mill, McKenzie did not abhor all property arising from rent. He believed that the maintenance of property in land, albeit of a limited kind, was consistent to the principles of utility. He wished to retain a property in land for the cultivators, which did not merely consist of a right to occupy and cultivate the same land for a long period. This is how James Mill had described the "proprietary" rights of ryots in India. McKenzie, on the contrary, was willing to reserve a more valuable property in the land for the ryots, which would allow the ryot to become a proprietor by owning a certain portion of the rent.

Eric Stokes's work identifies Holt Mackenzie as an unequivocal follower of the Ricardian doctrine of rent. Stokes argues that Mackenzie's proposals for the

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<sup>21</sup>He noted that "...the rule authorizing the exchequer to take as revenue one half of the produce, which in the hands of government is in a great manner nominal...becomes in the hands of its assignees, the zemindars or revenue contractors, a real measure of demand: and those persons, in a great part of the permanently settled districts, have therefore the power of destroying the property of the inferior, just as in the unsettled districts government may, and sometimes does, destroy the property of the cultivating zemindars by an excessive demand. For I conceive that, taking the general average of the country, if more than a third be taken by government, there can be no private property in the land; that is to say, no rent..." Ibid, 227.

<sup>22</sup>McKenzie noted that this was because the zemindars were, "...without any such obligation as attaches to the government of considering the general good, and as makes it our duty to restrict our demand within the legal limit, so as to be consistent with the existence of private property and the improved comfort of the people." Ibid, 226.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid, 298, emphasis mine.

assessment of the land revenue demand of the Ceded and Conquered Provinces were rooted in the net produce criterion declared by James Mill. But Stokes notes that in practice Mackenzie applied this principle very cautiously. Mackenzie, he argues, knew that it would be impossible to extract information on soil fertility from the multiplicity of local practices which determined payments between cultivators and revenue engagers.<sup>24</sup> My reading of this moment in the governance of rent differs from this analysis. I argue that Mackenzie's move away from Mill's Ricardianism can be better understood as a position grounded in a different political economy. It was not inspired by contingencies of "practice", which the "theory" could not address. Mackenzie's primary aim, as this section shows, was to excavate, and govern the "political". He was more interested in finding out the networks of proprietary power than a measure of soil fertility. Rent, for him, was not an index of varying productivity; it was a transaction which defined the relationships constituting the "political". Accordingly, Mackenzie believed that it is only by preserving some rent in the hands of the cultivators that a balance of power in agrarian relations could be maintained.

As the settlement was conducted on the basis of the principles of Regulation VII of 1822 in the Ceded and Conquered Provinces, officials observed that it progressed very slowly.<sup>25</sup> Such circumstances necessitated a modification of this regulation. William Bentinck, then governor-general, organized a conference of revenue-officers on this matter at Allahabad on 21 January 1833. Recommendations from this discussion led to a new plan of settlement, which got legislated as Regulation IX of 1833.<sup>26</sup> The settlement in Cuttack, which began in 1836, was executed according to the principles of this regulation. As expected, a particular relationship between rent and property framed this regulation. I now examine a minute by Bentinck which discussed this relation in detail. This minute formed a part of the guidelines of the settlement in Cuttack, and was sent to the Commissioner of Cuttack, as an enclosure to one of the circular orders of the Sudder Board of Revenue. It was one of those documents which, by virtue of its physical cohabitation in both the district record-room of Cuttack and in the India Office record-room in London, staged

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<sup>24</sup>Eric Stokes, *The English Utilitarians and India*, Delhi, 1989, 94-99.

<sup>25</sup>“The work of revision went on so slowly that when ten years had elapsed from the time of its initiation, it was calculated that it would take sixty more years to render the work complete.”, B.B. Misra, *The Central Administration of the East India Company, 1773-1834*, Great Britain, 1959, 217.

<sup>26</sup>Misra, *The Central Administration of the East India Company*.



a materially embodied effect of demonstrating the discursive cohabitation of the “imperial” and the “local”.

Bentinck argued that “...As far as the rights of the Government are concerned, I think I am at liberty to assume that a minute inquisition into the capacity of each field or each village of the country is unnecessary.”<sup>27</sup> He further pointed out that, “...As observed by the Governor of Madras... ‘In fixing the assessment of the lands of any village, the safest guide is the actual produce and collections of former years.’...”<sup>28</sup> Like McKenzie, Bentinck also believed that, as revenue, the government is not entitled to the full rent. For him revenue meant the government share, of the rent, or the proprietary profit of each landholding class.<sup>29</sup> It is evident that Bentinck’s articulation of rent differed significantly from the Ricardian rendition of the category. That is why he thought a minute examination into the productive capacities of land, by disaggregating the constituent elements of agricultural production, like cost of production, soil quality, or wages of labour, was not necessary in the process of fixing rent. Rather, he believed that the settlement of rent would bring forth a far more useful exercise—the mapping of the “political”, or the determination of the various degrees of proprietary rights distributed between the state and a variety of landholders. His discussion of rent, therefore, was entirely an analytical foray in the category of property in land.

Bentinck wrote extensively on tenures in this minute. I will not go into an analysis of his formulation, as the various modes in which the entire problematic of tenures were expressed would be the object of examination in the next chapter. Here, it will be sufficient to note that in this minute he came up with a particular formulation of the domain of legitimate proprietary rights, which proved to be influential in the context of the upcoming settlement in Cuttack. He proposed the

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<sup>27</sup>“Enclosure to Circular No. 190, Nov. 12, 1833, To Commissioners of Revenue (317-51)”, *Circular Orders of the SBOR at the Presidency of Fort William; Including the Rules of Practice for the Guidance of the Board and of the Commissioners of Revenue, from the year 1788 to the end of August 1837*, Calcutta, 1838, India Office Library. Also in “Acc. No. 43B”, Revenue 1832-33, BDR, OSA.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid.

<sup>29</sup>He pointed out that, “...Sir T. Munro has distinctly laid down the rules that all that Government should fix is, their own demand upon the Ryot for Revenue, while the rent which the Ryot shall demand from his cultivating tenant must vary according to seasons, crops, demand for particular produce, and numerous other details too minute for the Government to meddle with. There seems indeed no reason why the Government should interfere to regulate the wages of agricultural more than any other description of labour...” Ibid.

maintenance of only those proprietary rights in land which he considered authentic.<sup>30</sup> He identified three kinds of proprietary rights as authentic. These included a *Putteedaree* tenure, where the proprietary right rested in a land-sharing unit, called by Bentinck a ‘village community’, zemindars and talookdars of a certain kind, and only those ryots who were original hereditary occupants of the soil. He warned against confounding old, permanent, original tenures with new, temporary, false ones. Bentinck remarked, “that it should always be borne in mind, that though there may be cultivators who have proprietary rights or rights of occupancy, it does not follow that all cultivators have such rights; and that, on the other hand, though there may be Zemindars who are merely contractors for the revenue, there may be other zemindars who are entitled to be considered as proprietors also. The greatest care should be taken to discriminate between the different classes as well of Zemindar as cultivator, and to avoid confounding the Malgoozar of later years with the hereditary Zemindar; and the mere agricultural labourer...with the hereditary ryot whose ancestors perhaps first broke up the soil and paid the revenue, or rent of the lands, direct to the servants of the State...”<sup>31</sup>

In this manner, rent was used as a heuristic device in defining and establishing an entire matrix of proprietary rights as the central object of agrarian governance in early nineteenth-century British India. Mackenzie and Bentinck’s formulation of the “political”, woven into the regulations of 1822 and 1833 were crucial moments in this particular political-economic articulation of rent. The way they defined the “political”, as a dispersed assemblage of proprietary rights and political power, will be taken up in the next chapter. For the time being, I will bring attention to the fact that this was also the time when settlement operations began in Cuttack.

### **Settling the “political”: the crowd in Cuttack**

Fixing rates of rent was an immensely complex affair in the settlement of Cuttack. The process of settling rent unearthed the various relations of power embedded in contending proprietary claims. The category of rent, therefore, could never be

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<sup>30</sup>He noted that, “It appears to me that the gross or Cucha Jummabundee of an estate being once ascertained, the rule should be to assume as the Government share 70 or 75 per cent, leaving the remainder to cover all expenses of collection, all risks, and all proprietary profits; and it should be prescribed that, on account of Malikana, not less than 10 nor more than 20 per cent, and on account of expenses not less than 5, nor...more than 15 per cent should be allowed.” Ibid.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid.

fashioned out of an assessment of variations in soil fertility. In Talooka Bishnupur, Pergunnah Bakrabad, Mr. Hunter, the Collector, tried to derive rent solely from the productive potential of lands of various kinds. F.J. Halliday, secretary to the Board of Revenue noted the terrible incomprehension resulting from such a method. Halliday pointed out that, “These sorts he found to amount to three hundred! And he reduced them by a process not explained to the less alarming but still unintelligible number of twenty nine.”<sup>32</sup> Such a method faced immediate rejection. The Commissioner, Mr. Mills, called such estimates “conjectural”. Everywhere rent rates were determined with reference to the specific proprietary status of different kinds of landholders. Thus, Mill pointed out that “the assignment of a trifle more than the moiety of...produce to the cultivator in which are included risks, outlay, labour, maintenance is a very insufficient provision. I would have rather allowed him half of what remains from the gross produce of the land after deducting all expenses balancing such calculations with the rents actually found to have been paid...”<sup>33</sup>

But protecting the cultivator as a policy was not always appreciated. In settling Talooka Koorkoora, Pergunnah Kowakund, Mr. Taylor stated that, “I have based all my calculations on the principle of leaving to the cultivators after payment of the tax on his land, & defraying the necessary expenses of culture half at least of the produce.”<sup>34</sup> Halliday, deputed as a supervisor of settlement, objected to such a decision. On the basis of a hypothesized calculation, he pointed out that such a method leaves only 1/5<sup>th</sup> of the produce as “rent” to the landlord, which is a dismally low share. Halliday argued that, “...the proportion of rent to produce always decreases with the progress of civilization & improvement & is now in England on an average about one fifth having been formerly one fourth, one third or even two fifths. If then in an unimproved & semi-civilized country like Cuttack Mr. Taylor has really assigned as rent to the landlord only one fifth he has assuredly committed a great mistake on the side of moderation & probably underassessed the lands very considerably...”<sup>35</sup> Halliday was generally against the notion that the rent of ryots needed to be fixed in order to prevent limitless exaction by the zemindar. During the settlement of Putna Buheepore, Pergunnah Kowulkund, he commented elaborately

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<sup>32</sup>“Memorandum on Talooka Bishnubur, Pergunnah Bakrabad, Zillah Cuttack”, *Copies of Memoranda on certain Settlements in Bauleah, Cuttack, Chittagong and Murshidabad Divisions* by Mr. F.J. Halliday, Secretary to the Board of Revenue, Deputed to Settlement work, 1837-1838, WBSA.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid.

<sup>34</sup>“Memorandum on Talooka Koorkoora, Pergunnah Kowakund’, Zillah Cuttack, Ibid.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid.

on the role of rent in determining the relation between zemindars and ryots. He maintained that,

“I have been as far as my opportunities went, a careful observer of the relations between Zemindar and tenant and the result of my observations has weaned me in a very great degree from the prejudice adopted by most persons from the earlier writings on Indian statistics respecting the universal oppressions and exactions of Zemindars and the universal miseries of the Ryots. I am certain that the zemindars are much bellied on this point and that their treatment of their tenants, little understood by us, is forbearing & sympathising in a far greater degree than we usually give credit for. In short I do not believe that the Zemindars as a body do oppose their Ryots as has been supposed...”<sup>36</sup>

More importantly, he did not consider the hereditary occupant cultivator or the thanee ryot of Cuttack to be a proprietor. He described them as “resident farmers”, and noted that by fixing their rents, the government is making proprietors out of farmers. Halliday observed that,

“...in the case of the Thanees...they are not said to be proprietors but farmers who have we are told a right to a fixed money rent and to permanent occupation of their tenures as long as they pay that rent. To the latter portion of their supposed rights, I have no objection, but the former appears to me to involve a contradiction in terms. For in order to avoid trenching upon profits and wages which we are of course utterly unable to define and which after all may often be infringed we are obliged to exceed the other way and trench upon rent. But a farmer who receives in addition to wages and profits, a share of the rent is pro tanto a proprietor, which the Thanees do not claim to be.”<sup>37</sup>

Halliday was in favor of fixing rents at “market rates”, and reserving proprietary profits only for the zemindars, identified by him as landlords.

It is evident from Halliday’s characterization of rent that he was speaking in the language of Malthusian rent theory. His notion of a fair rate of rent was premised

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<sup>36</sup>“Memorandum on Khureedgee Putna Buheepore, Pergunnah Kowul Kund,” Zillah Cuttack, Ibid.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid.

on a universal relation between rate of rent and capital investment in agriculture. More importantly, adhering strictly to Ricardian theory, Halliday divided the domain of agricultural production into “landlords”, “farmers” and “labourers”, making only the zemindar, or the landlord, deserving of property from rent. In tune with this classificatory scheme, he described thanee ryots as “farmers”. Thus, it is but natural that he believed “that the true protection of the ryot is to be found not in violating for his sake the laws of political economy but in giving him ready access to Courts of justice and teaching him to depend upon written agreements.”<sup>38</sup> He did not perceive rent as that payment which reflected different proprietary relations of power in different nations. This is how Richard Jones construed rent. Jones’s political economy was rooted in such an assemblage of property and political power, or the “political”. He argued that in India, these relations of power could not be divided readily into landlords, farmers, and labourers. They were dispersed over a range of landholding bodies. Rent, in the Jonesian scheme, therefore, was primarily a pointer to this field of power. But for Halliday, rent remained more conventionally Ricardian—a measure of the differential fertility of soil, payable to the sole proprietor, the landlord.

But Halliday’s assertions went in vain. His political-economic faith notwithstanding, the rent of thanee ryots was fixed in Cuttack. Interestingly, in Cuttack, only zemindars and village proprietors of different descriptions, like Surburakars, Mokuddums, Pudhans, were recognized officially as receiving a proprietary allowance.<sup>39</sup> The thanee ryots were not officially registered as proprietors, receiving proprietary allowances. But despite that, their rents were fixed. It might appear that the settlement policy in Cuttack concurred with Halliday’s representations in not identifying the thanee ryot as proprietor. But, by that same standard, the fixing of rent of the thanee ryot appears contradictory. The contradiction gets resolved if one looks at the difference within contemporary political economy in the framing of the relation between rent and property. Within the settlement policy of Cuttack, rent was fundamentally deployed as the sign of the “political”, or as the expression of relations of power between superior and inferior landholders. Rent was conceived primarily as that instrument which regulated this equation, and since the thanee ryot, or the hereditary cultivator, had already been identified as a vulnerable actor in this matrix

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<sup>38</sup>Ibid.

<sup>39</sup>The discursive logic of this distinction would be traced through a history of tenures in the next chapter.

of power, it was important to adjust the relation somewhat in his favor by fixing rent. I will argue that this kind of political economy continued to inform the use of rent throughout the settlement. Ricardian uses of the category jostled to find space, but were, almost always, pushed to the margins.

For official proprietors as well, rent was pitched as that transaction which stabilized a field of power. Regarding the settlement of Talooka Chunderbanpoor, Pergunnah Sosa, the Commissioner differed with the settling officer on the usefulness of Surburakars. He emphasized that, “Many of these Surburakars have possessed their villages for centuries & have successfully resisted in the Courts, all attempts of the zemindars to raise their rents.”<sup>40</sup> So, not only were the Surburakars considered ancient proprietors of Cuttack, their significance was also understood in terms of their role in maintaining rent as an equitable transaction of power between zemindars and other inferior holders. They were considered as important contributors to the diffusion of power in the domain of proprietary relations. There were several instances where fixing of rent meant balancing power-equations between zemindars and ryots. Even when settling officers thought that such a balancing act might go against the prospect of “improvement”, by curbing the powers of the zemindar to encourage agriculture, the “political” pre-configuration of rent dictated their actions.

In Pergunnah Saibeer tobacco was cultivated extensively. It was one of those rare estates in Cuttack which produced in abundance a commercially valuable crop. Owing to the vulnerability of the tobacco lands to encroachment of the river, rent on those lands used to be settled by the Zemindar at the close of the rains every year. But during the settlement, the Commissioner noted, that the “The Thanee ryots insisted on their tobacco lands being secured to them...at a particular rate, and in order to indulge them and prevent their being ruined by their own perverseness the rates were lowered some forty five per cent, and to those holding lands the situation of which is very precarious a small portion of waste of a good quality has been given...”<sup>41</sup> The Commissioner thought that the earlier arrangement was more suited to the conditions of agriculture and situation of ryots. He pointed out that, “...every order which tends to the division of the profits of cultivation amongst greater numbers is injurious to every interest connected with the land, these “independent” ryots themselves not

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<sup>40</sup>“Memorandum on Talooka Chunderbanpoor, Pergunnah Sosa, Zillah Cuttack”, *Copies of Memoranda on certain Settlements*.

<sup>41</sup>“Memorandum on Pergunnah Saibeer, Zillah Cuttack”, *Ibid*.

excepted for not withstanding the reductions made they will be ruined the first year in which the deposit necessary for the growth of the plant shall be wanting, the zemindar will afford them no assistance, and exercise no forbearance, he will be the person ultimately to benefit by the sacrifice...”<sup>42</sup> But, in spite of the Commissioner’s judgment, which reflected a typically Malthusian belief in the potential of the landlord to act as an “improver”, settlement was made by fixing rates of each ryots and providing a culturable waste of good quality to all those ryots owning lands exposed to risks of flood. Once again, it can be seen that a preference emerging from dominant Ricardian and Malthusian political-economic notions—of centralized, landlord-induced, capital-dependent agriculture—was not able to determine the function of rent, on the face of its “political” deployment.

Fixing the rates low was the unequivocal objective of the settlement. Such a generalized policy certainly emerged out of the notion that rent was the key reflector of relations of power in the agrarian landscape. The strictly natural basis of rent did not, however, escape its use in the settlement. Naturalism is especially significant in Ricardo’s definition of the category. He painstakingly separated several constituent elements of agricultural production from that quintessential factor giving rise to rent, namely the productive capacity of soil. It is because of this exclusively natural origin of rent, that he claimed it to be an income without “value”. Mackenzie perhaps came closest to suggesting a method of settlement which would have embraced a minute inquiry into the productive capacity of each field. As I have shown, this method was rejected by Bentinck as unnecessarily laborious, because rent was assembled in the practices of agrarian governance as a different kind of political-economic category. Accordingly the naturalism inscribed in the Ricardian constitution of rent, was redefined by the “political”. In almost all instances at Cuttack, this naturalism got emplotted within frames of the “political”.

So, in Talooka Patamoondie, a host of reasons were cited by the officials for fixing low rent rates. It was noted that the sea broke through the embankments in 1831, impregnating the lands of the pergunnah with saline matter, which led to a severe deterioration of the produce. The lands were still exposed to such risks of inundation. Moreover, there was no market nearby for disposal of the produce. But when the measuring aumeens prepared the jumma bundie the Collector found that the

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<sup>42</sup>Ibid.

returns were full of exaggerated and erroneous estimates. Moreover, the Collector stated that, "...no confidence could be placed on the surburakars records few Rhyots had Pottahs" and finally, "...the only means left were to take the zemindars papers as the guide and to assess the lands according to their quality and advantages of situation..."<sup>43</sup> It can be seen that although the natural circumstances and capacities of land were recorded specifically in describing the process of fixing rent, following the official directives of settlement, past payments were taken as the ultimate guide in ascertaining rents.

But the records of past payments could only be taken from superior landholders like zemindars and village proprietors, who were represented as more powerful actors than cultivators in official discourse. So, their accounts were accepted only after assemblies in the villages admitted them. In Patamoondie too, the zemindar's papers were accepted only through such an assembly. As the Collector noted in his report: "I also visited every village in the Pergunnah, reviewed the mouzawarree estimates prepared by the Deputy Collector on the spot and heard the objection of the people to the demand which it was proposed to fix on the village, so that I can with confidence state that no little pains has been taken to make an equitable and fair settlement...The surburakars are satisfied, the Thanee ryots have willingly engaged...and the demand is on the whole moderate."<sup>44</sup> Such village assemblies further reinforced the particular political-economic placement of rent which was rooted to perceptions of a dispersal of power in the sphere of the "political" in India. Reflecting the same spirit, in settling Talook Rughoonathpore, the Collector noted: "After checking the measurement and classification and making notes where it was necessary, I took up the case of each Thanee Ryot separately examined the papers of the zemindar and canoongoe as to the quantity and quality of his land enquired into his condition viz., whether he had risen or fallen in the world and why, heard any thing he had to say for himself and then fixed his Jummah."<sup>45</sup>

Settlement reports in Cuttack went on representing such compulsory and unmediated intercourse of the officials with the organic constituents of the domain of the "political" as the decisive factor in determining rent. This had significant

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<sup>43</sup>Letter from A.J.M. Mills, Collector's Office, Cuttack, Bengal Sudder Board of Revenue, 20<sup>th</sup> April, 1838, No. 4, IOL.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid.

<sup>45</sup>'Letter to Assistant Commissioner of Revenue, Cuttack, from J. Grant, Collector, Balasore, 25<sup>th</sup> December, 1835', Old No. 506, Acc. No. 95C, August 1835 to November 1835, *CDR, Revenue*, OSA.



implications in delineating the figures of the “political”, laying down its boundaries, differentiating between its authentic and false members, and finally, establishing an entire calculus of relationships as the object of agrarian governance in British India. I do not suggest that the measures taken to fix rent in Cuttack reflected a governmental intention to remove inequalities of power, by granting protection to cultivators against landlords. That will amount to an uncritical reproduction of the official narrative, without any interrogation of the meanings of its categories. Rather, I argue that the critique of big landlords during this period was simultaneously a celebration of new wielders of power in agrarian localities. This foregrounding of new power holders, like the surburakars, the thanee ryots, or even the “village” was based on further exclusions, and other hierarchies. It will be shown in the next chapter that despite being presented as “ryots”, or “peasant cultivators”, these figures were far removed from the tillers of the soil. Moreover, the same governmental strategies which awarded greater privileges, than what they used to enjoy earlier, to them, also denounced and devaluated the rights of other tillers of the soil. Rent played a critical role in determining the contours of this landscape of agrarian power. But these matters will be analyzed in greater detail in the coming chapters.

### **A theory of practice**

In the 1860's Henry Ricketts wrote a series of essays from London on the question of rent in Bengal. Ricketts was an experienced administrator, who had climbed the ladders of the British Indian bureaucracy between the 1820's and 1840's. Beginning as a Collector, he ended his administrative career as an influential and respected member of the Board of Revenue. For my purpose, Ricketts is particularly relevant as a large part of his lower-level administrative career was spent in the Cuttack Division. He began as the Magistrate and Collector of Cuttack in 1827 and eventually left the Division in the 1840's as its Commissioner. Other than Cuttack, Ricketts also served at Chittagong and parts of the Central Provinces. Later, as a member of the Board of Revenue, to which he was appointed in 1849, he regularly expressed strong opinions on various matters of agrarian policy. He took an active role in the debates preceding the formulation of the “Rent Act”, or Act X of 1859.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup>David Washbrook, “Ricketts, Henry”, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

In the context of several legal disputes around questions of land rent in Bengal, Ricketts wrote a number of essays from England. The disputes were mostly between Indigo planters and ryots over the issue of enhancement of rent. As such cases flooded the district courts accompanied by a number of incidents of violent conflicts between ryots and planters, a range of opinions were generated at different levels of the administration on more general questions regarding the category of rent. Administrators started critically reviewing the history of agrarian governance in Bengal since the establishment of the Permanent Settlement. As I have shown earlier, even in this context rent was framed within the “political”, as that transaction which would give shape to all proprietary relations of power in the agrarian economy of Bengal.<sup>47</sup>

Ricketts pointed out confidently in his essays that the foundational problems of agrarian governance in Bengal were a handiwork of the policy of Permanent Settlement, which left undefined a large area of relationships between the landlord and the peasant cultivator in the countryside. Once interpreted in this way, Ricketts was also quick to suggest that the only solution resided in a detailed settlement of agrarian relations in the discontented areas of Bengal. Such a settlement, he further noted, should take its inspiration from the model of land survey and settlement that was carried out in the Cuttack Division between 1836 and 1843. According to Ricketts, it was Cuttack, a marginal area of Bengal, from which the rest of Bengal should draw its model for an efficient, productive and peaceful resolution of the problems experienced in the domain of land relations. At the heart of his plea for a detailed settlement, the category of rent loomed large. Like other administrators of Bengal, Ricketts also shared the assumption that rent was the constitutive thread of the relations of power between landholders. So it was necessary to devise means to formulate it correctly.

The first of the four essays that Ricketts wrote on this matter was entitled “The Real Difficulties in Bengal and How to Settle Them”. Commenting on the Indigo disputes, Ricketts noted that, “The real struggle is, which party is entitled to the advantages accruing to the different classes engaged in agriculture, from the increased

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<sup>47</sup> Andrew Sartori, in an essay on the Bengal Rent Act of 1859, argues that the debate about custom in fixing rent was not a conflict between liberal utilitarianism and conservatism, but was *internal* to the discourse of liberalism. See Andrew Sartori, “Custom and Political Economy in Bengal’s “Great Rent Case,” 1859-1865”, Unpublished Paper, 2008.

value of all agricultural produce.”<sup>48</sup> The problem, in Ricketts’ opinion, originated from the range of administrative mistakes committed during the policy of Permanent Settlement. Ricketts lamented that “We have ever since continued to write and speak of the rights of the ryots, but they were never ascertained; of the Pergunnah rates, which were never adjusted; of the settlement, at which nothing was settled, but the revenue to be paid by each superior holder to the state.”<sup>49</sup> All this litigation, Ricketts observed, displayed that rent was the battleground of interests between superior and inferior landholders. While the superior landholders tried to enhance the rent, the peasant cultivators tried hard to resist such an increase. Thus, Ricketts noted that in resolving these disputes, “There is but one complete remedy, and that is to do now what ought to have been done in 1793, to make forthwith a field survey, and a complete registry of all rights and interests in the lands...”<sup>50</sup>

With this confident declaration, Ricketts brought Cuttack into the discussion. He pointed out that there should not be any apprehension, on the part of the state, in proceeding with such a plan of settlement. On the contrary, he suggested that, there are examples within Bengal only, which displayed excellent results in the administration of land relations, produced out of such a settlement. “Previously to the settlement of Cuttack, the province deteriorated each year, the people were discontented, and embarrassments and difficulties increased. Since the settlement, the province has flourished, the inhabitants have been among the most peaceful and well-disposed of our subjects, there has been less litigation than in any other part of the empire...Let Bengal be treated precisely in the same manner, and there is no reason why there should not be the same result.”<sup>51</sup>

Ricketts followed this essay with a second one, titled, “The Rent Difficulties in Bengal and How to Remedy Them; The Rent Facilities in Cuttack and How to Preserve Them”. Here Ricketts developed his critique of the official interpretation of the disturbed agrarian conditions in Bengal. He raised the example of the “Great Rent Case”, between Hills and Ishwur Ghose and began systematically recording his points of difference with the opinion of the Judge. The Chief Justice, in his judgment, had proclaimed that a “fair and equitable” rate of rent could be reached only by applying the Malthusian definition of rent. In laying a guideline for the Special Commissioner

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<sup>48</sup>Henry Ricketts, *The Real Difficulties in Bengal and How to Settle Them*, London, 1861, 4.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid, 11.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid.

<sup>51</sup>Ricketts, *The Real Difficulties*, 12.

deputed in the Indigo districts to settle the rent disputes, the Judge said, “We cannot lay down any better rule for his guidance than that we have quoted from Mr. Malthus in his *Principles of Political Economy*”<sup>52</sup>. The judgment further observed, that “He there defines rent to be ‘that portion of the value of the whole produce which remains to the owner of the land after all the outgoings belonging to its cultivation, of whatever kind, have been paid, including the profits of the capital employed, estimated according to the usual and ordinary rate of agricultural capital at the time being.’”<sup>53</sup>

In arguing against the official opinion, Ricketts pointed out that such political-economic prescriptions cannot be followed in fixing rent. He had his own propositions to offer in the matter. In another essay, titled, “A Few Last Words on the Rent Difficulties in Bengal,” he continued with these propositions. In both these essays, one of the primary objections he raised against the implementation of the Malthusian definition was the impossibility of calculation of the “outgoings of cultivation”. Indicating the infinite variety of costs related to cultivation, Ricketts pointed out that it is *practically* impossible to make an accurate calculation of all of them. He noted that the plan of basing the assessment on a comparison between costs of production and value of produce was proposed through Regulation VII, 1822, but later rescinded in Regulation XI, 1833. Ricketts had his own explanation of how a settlement could overcome such *practical* difficulties. Throughout the three essays, he maintained that questions of practice can only be sensitively tackled in the field, but not by adhering to rigid political-economic guidelines. He argued that as long as contentions around rent, and consequently, questions of power relations between agrarian groups, remained trapped in law and in the court-room, they would always lead to confusion.

Ricketts represented the law, and its performative arena, the courtroom, both metaphorically and literally, the prisons of false analytical abstractions, in contradistinction to which stood the space of the open field, symbolizing truth and pure transparency. “The same point would be ruled in many different ways by the different courts. Good lands would be assessed at a low rate, and bad land at a high rate, the courts having been misled by clever representations, which they were unable

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<sup>52</sup>Henry Ricketts, *The Rent Difficulties in Bengal and How to Remedy Them, The Rent Facilities in Cuttack and How to Preserve Them*, London, 1863, 7.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid.

to test by the only efficient test, investigation conducted over a considerable tract of country.”<sup>54</sup> The field was also represented as that authentic, embodied, organic space of those relations of power which determined rent. Ricketts went on saying that the same people, who, in the court-room, stood as agents of corruption and deceit, became the torch-bearers of truth and objectivity in the open country. “He who might for a very small *douceur* be brought into the court to substantiate any story, however improbable, when taken into the field with all his neighbours among whom he has lived from his youth, and among whom he must live till his dying day, will, in a few hours, class a thousand acres of land, varying in every imaginable way, without making a mistake or causing a single remonstrance or murmur from all the eager listeners around him.”<sup>55</sup> I argue that in Ricketts’s statements the field was represented as beyond, and opposed to, political-economic doctrines. But his perception of rent, as an articulation of the true nature of relations of power, remained tied to a different kind of political economy, which had reoriented itself in the light of the “political”. His notion of the *practical*, therefore, was already-always inscribed by a theoretical framing of the category of rent, just like most of the political economists of his time.

It is easy to see how Ricketts garnered faith in the practical. As a settlement officer in Cuttack, he was bewildered by the inexplicable variety of rates of the lands in Talook Noanud. He noted that, “land of the same description and in every respect equal advantages not only pays at various rates in different villages, but in the same village and on the same Chuck. In one village, I found as many as 34 rates for rice lands alone.”<sup>56</sup> Guided by a Ricardian commonsense, I will argue, he made an attempt to correspond rent to the productive capacity of the land. He tried to introduce a consistent scale of classification for different soils. The effort was futile, as he remarked: “In the hope of establishing something approaching uniformity for future guidance I appointed a Punchayet consisting of 5 Zemindars 9 Serberakars and 18 Ryots who met for several day and endeavoured to adjust 3 or 4 rates for each sort of land but they completely failed...”<sup>57</sup> So he left the variety in the way it existed, in a form which was incomprehensible to him. But the rates reached at in this way were satisfactory to the different landholders in the Pergunnah. As I have argued earlier,

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<sup>54</sup>Ibid, 11.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid, 18.

<sup>56</sup>“Letter to the Commissioner of Revenue, Cuttack, from H. Ricketts, Collector, Balasore”, 1<sup>st</sup> January, 1836, Acc. No. 16B, Old No. 30, April 1825 to April 1838, *BDR, Revenue, OSA*.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid.

such “village assemblies” were considered as one of those authentic markers of the “political” which constituted “rent”. In Ricketts’ vision of settlement, people of the “field” stood for similar organic truths, expressing existing relations around land, to which political-economic doctrines appeared as external and incompatible. That is why when he tried to refigure the existing variety in the rates, which reflected contested relations of power over the land, into a uniform standard, he failed. The “field” in this case was a specific configuration of a conflictual arena of interests, which could not be reshaped into a new configuration by a group of landholders representing a unity of interest alien to the existing arrangement of power.

Ricketts noted some of the specificities of the power-relations around rent in another instance of settlement: “...in a small village 100 Beegahs is held Lakhiraj, and not included in the Jumabundee, but...a considerable revenue is derived by the village zemindar from such lands. The Lakhirajdar’s land is capable of growing a second crop but not without irrigation. The village proprietor has command of the water, and he allows the Lakhirajdars so much water as will bring the second crop...receiving half the rent realized from the land.”<sup>58</sup>

Such were the contours of the “political”, revealed by the administration of rent. Practices of agrarian governance in early nineteenth-century British India worked within a framework of political economy which was undergirded by a matrix of property and political power. In settling rent, therefore, administrators followed the variety in the relations of power which constituted the domain of the “political” in British India. These relations emerged out of varying degrees of proprietary rights. They were distributed over a range of landholders, and landholding bodies. As Jones had noted, this domain of proprietary power was of an essentially dispersed character. I argue that the practices of agrarian governance were embedded in a similar political-economic matrix, which is why such a diffused domain of proprietary power—opened up by the administrative excursions around rent—was constituted as the object of agrarian governance. I do not interpret this process, of endorsing a variety of power-relations in settling rent, as a pragmatic move, inspired by the search for local collaborators. It was not a case of governance being arm-twisted by local powers to merely confirm the existing power-arrangements, or to ratify the “facts on the

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<sup>58</sup>“Extract of a letter from the Collector of Balasore to the Commissioner for the 19<sup>th</sup> Division, Cuttack”, 22<sup>nd</sup> May 1834, Old No. 465, Acc. No. 93C, 16<sup>th</sup> July 1835 to 16<sup>th</sup> November 1835, *CDR, Revenue*, OSA.

ground”. On the contrary, by fixing rent, landholders of different kinds were instituted as power-brokers of localities through specific mechanisms of exclusions and inclusions, the logic of which was political-economic.

As it has been evident from this chapter, village proprietors, and ryots of certain kinds were being empowered by these practices of governance against big landlords. The following chapters will show how particular relations of power were carved out of an infinite variety of agrarian relations in different localities, and established as the legitimate form of the “political” in British India. The rationality immanent in this process of governance was a transformed political-economic one. Specific configurations of local power were inscribed by this rationality. Ultimately, governance aimed at creating conditions of production. The “local” was made internal to, and constitutive of, production. The next section will demonstrate, and argue, that during this period within the sphere of governance itself, the category of rent was being perceived as the key indicator of proprietary power, which determined the conditions of production.

### **Rent and production**

James Alexander wrote an essay on the relation between “rent” and land tenures in the “Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal” in 1845. In this section, I will show how Alexander developed a political-economic explanation of rent, grounded in the “political”, namely, an interconstitutive linkage between property and political power. Reflecting an evident epistemological kinship with Richard Jones’s political economy, James Alexander’s essay forged crucial analytical relations between rent, property, political power and production.

Right at the beginning, Alexander declared that rent is an expression of proprietary relations, which is also a field of political power. In fact, he argued that the different kinds of ‘nerikh’, or rates of rent, reveal the specific contours of a relation of property and power between the zemindar and the ryot. That is why, he noted, “in the ryuttee as in the zemindaree tenure, *the rent* which it will yield *is the distinguishing mark of each sort of tenure...*”<sup>59</sup> Alexander went on to argue that since

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<sup>59</sup>James Alexander, “On the tenures and fiscal relations of the owners, and occupants of the soil in Bengal, Behar, and Orissa”, *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, Vol. XIV, Part II, July-December, 1845, 531, emphasis mine.

different kinds of rent articulate different kinds of relationships between landlords and tenants, they also shape the conditions of production differently. In a sense, like Jones, Alexander was suggesting that the context, and therefore, the nature of production get determined by these relations of power. Thus, he noted, “the landlord must constantly observe his tenant to ensure his honesty, and the tenant is discouraged by the reflection that one-half of his labour must be bestowed for the benefit of another.”<sup>60</sup> It must be remembered that Richard Jones had made the same connection between rent and the productive efficiency of labour, demonstrating how different kinds of rents led to varying productivity of labour.<sup>61</sup> For Jones, productivity was rooted in the “political”. As he noted that, “it will be found that the motives to industry, which operate in different communities, depend upon the relations which connect the classes of those communities.”<sup>62</sup>

Rent, Alexander argued in a manner similar to Harington, marked the contours of the field of power existing between the zemindar and the ryot. In this field, he observed, “there is a constant struggle between himself and his tenantry regarding the share which they are respectively to enjoy of the surplus profits of cultivation.”<sup>63</sup> Various factors determined the scope of this proprietary relation. Alexander argued that customary laws of different kinds constituted the “political”, restricting the landlord’s capacity of extraction. In a certain sense, as Andrew Sartori has shown in a recent article, custom here acted as a political-economic category.<sup>64</sup> It was not viewed as necessarily antithetical to political-economic formulations. However, I argue that the political-economic underpinnings of custom here were not entirely similar to those identified by Sartori in his examination of the category in the context of debates on rent laws in Bengal. There were, of course, certain clearly identifiable similarities. But there were crucial differences as well, which, I will argue, did not allow the political economy of custom in this case to be interpreted, as Sartori does, in terms of either Lockean or Ricardian/Malthusian frameworks. Custom here was a political-economic

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<sup>60</sup>Ibid, 532.

<sup>61</sup>Jones argued that “there are three causes which determine the productive power of the industry of nations: 1. The continuity with which it is exerted, 2. The skill with which it is exerted, 3. The power by which it is aided...Hence it follows that the production of wealth depends upon the productiveness or efficiency of labour...” William Whewell (ed.) *Literary Remains, consisting of Lectures and Tracts on Political Economy of the late Rev. Richard Jones*, London, 1859, 189.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid, 196.

<sup>63</sup>Alexander, “*On the tenures and fiscal relations*”, 533.

<sup>64</sup>See Andrew Sartori, “A Liberal Discourse of Custom in Colonial Bengal” *Past and Present*, 212, August 2011, 163-97.



category only in so far as it was determined by the “political”, i.e., by a political economy which opposed and reconfigured the Ricardian framework.

Alexander enlisted a number of rents paid in Bengal. In describing each of them, he elaborated upon the nature of the matrix of proprietary power in which they were located. He noted that the “Nerick Mocurreree” was a fixed rate of payment granted to cultivators validated by a written document. Its basis was that the cultivator had held the land at fixed rates for twelve years prior to the Decennial Settlement, during which period he paid his dues regularly. “Nerick Mowrossee”, on the other hand was a rate established by inheritance. A prescriptive right to hold certain lands at fixed rates was allowed to cultivators because they were considered the first to cultivate those lands. These rents were called “Nerick-i-kudeem”. Alexander noted that the “village”, as a customary body, was also invested with the power to grant prescriptive proprietary rights. These were fixed rates of rent, “...established for each peculiar class of soil...”<sup>65</sup> in the village. “The *Nerick-i-Mukuddum*”, Alexander continued, “is a rate established in favour of particular individuals, who claim to hold land at rates below those of the village, as a privilege of caste or office; where there is sufficient evidence to prove that this title has been previously recognized, it acquires a force from prescription which is not easily set aside...”<sup>66</sup> The “Jungle-booree Nerick” was another class of rents which were rates at which cultivators entered into engagements to bring forested lands under cultivation. They depended upon various factors—the density of the jungle, the markets, rivers, and roads nearby, the quality of the soil, the means of irrigation, the demand for land in the neighbourhood, and also the climate.

All these factors taken together, in Alexander’s analysis, accounted for the nature of proprietary power, and, consequently, the category of rent. In his description of the relation between custom and rent, there was a vision of the ryot as the capitalist farmer, similar to the one Sartori identifies in the George Campbell’s invocation of custom in the course of debates over rent in Bengal in the 1850s. Like Campbell, Alexander also argued that custom guaranteed this political-economic capacity to the ryots—of being more like a farmer, and less like an agricultural labourer. He stated that “...if confidence in the stability of the rates is not so strong, and tenures held under *prescriptive titles have not the same value as marketable commodities*, neither

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<sup>65</sup>Alexander, “*On the tenures and fiscal relations*”, 537.

<sup>66</sup>Ibid, 538.

will the cultivator himself incur the risk of any extensive outlay in the formation of gardens, the excavation of tanks, and the building of houses...”<sup>67</sup> But Campbell and others in that context had argued that “customary” rents were low because they assumed the ryot to have a right to the soil. He was imagined as the original improver, thereby possessing a right to a portion of the rent fund. There was a Lockeanism at work here, Sartori argues, through the reworking of the category of custom.

In my opinion, however, Alexander’s argument for a political economy of custom was rooted in a different perspective. Here, custom served to demarcate the domain of the “political”, or the assemblage of property and political power, which conditioned production. The strength of custom, to condition the productive efficiency of labour, derived from uninterrupted residence, inheritance, prescriptive rights of holding on to a land by virtue of being its original cultivator, and the capacities of the village to regulate proprietary power. All these elements together defined what can be called in political-economic terms the tightly woven relation between property and political power, or the “political”. Alexander’s political-economy of custom, therefore, did not emerge from any variety of the Ricardian, Malthusian, or Lockean analytical frames. On the contrary, it was steeped in one of their most powerful critiques—an internal one, a *different* kind of political economy.

## Conclusion

This chapter has argued that in the practices of agrarian governance rent served as a point of entry into the complex architecture of the “political” in British India. I contend that the category of rent did not operate in its Ricardian form. It was not understood as a measure of differential soil fertility, and, accordingly, it did not function to divide the domain of agrarian relations into landlords, farmers, and labourers. Rather, it was used to open up a more complex field of power-relations between agrarian actors of myriad descriptions. It was fundamentally understood as the defining transaction of power in an agrarian society which was constituted of dispersed and divided linkages between property and political power. Consequently, administrators deployed rent to balance several conflicting equations of power. These

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<sup>67</sup>Ibid, 537, emphasis mine, the equivalence between “prescriptive titles” and “marketable commodities”, once again, underscored that custom, as a category, was internal to the political-economic articulation of production and exchange.

were equations between the state, the big landlords, the village proprietors, and cultivators of various kinds. The Ricardian framing of rent saw it as a portion of the produce which belonged legitimately to the landlord, as he was the proprietor of the soil. In this case, however, since the proprietary field itself was understood as diffused and restricted, the landlord's legitimacy was also questioned, as property was not considered as an unequivocal right possessed exclusively by one individual. James Mill's interpretation of the state as the paramount landlord was challenged, as different kinds of partial, but strong proprietary rights were identified amongst other landholders, ranging from village proprietors to ryots. Even when the state was admitted as the supreme landlord, it was considered important to leave some rent in the hands of the cultivators, and grant them some privilege of property, by preventing the predatory impulses of superior landholders exercised through excessive collection of rent. All of this, as the upcoming chapters will show in greater detail, was linked to a redefinition of the political economic framing of production. The move away from Ricardianism did not mean an abandonment of its organizing category, production. It meant the recasting of production in the light of varying agrarian power-relations in different localities. Rent was a gateway to this domain. Its administration, thus, signified strategies directed at refashioning production as local power. This is how the meaning of production changed, and the "local", as the transformed "political", defined this process. Settling the rent question was one of its vital nodes.

It must be evident that the chapter has, in the process of tracking this particular political-economic deployment of rent in the field of agrarian governance, opened up a lot of questions about property in land. I have argued that rent was used as the most significant tool in demarcating the domain of property and political power. But at all such sites, where rent got administered, an array of proprietary relations sprung up. These relations will be examined carefully in the upcoming chapter. In the next chapter, I will show how a range of proprietary figures, taken together in their varying relations to each other, constituted the domain of power on land. This was the "political"—a field of power which got instituted as the object of agrarian governance in British India during the first half of the nineteenth century. The upcoming chapter will argue that specific arrangements of the "political", different in different regions, were organized and distributed by practices of governance in terms of the category of "local". In that chapter, the "political" will be analyzed as a complex spatial and temporal concatenation. It will be understood as a political economy, which

underwent dynamic reconfigurations in the hydra-headed networks of agrarian governance.

## **Chapter Four**

### **Locating localities: political economy, agrarian governance, “Cuttack” and “India”**

This chapter is about temporal geographies generated by complex interconnections between political economy and agrarian governance. It argues that specificities of agrarian power in the different localities of British India took shape out of changing articulations of a governmental category, the “local”. The “local” was a classificatory framework which explained these specificities as varying degrees of resemblances with, or differences from, a general spatio-temporal imagination of an authentic, ancient, Hindu/Indian relation between property and political power. In this chapter, I pursue shifting deployments of the “local” over multifarious sites of governance. I argue that the formulation of this authentic relation between property and political power was continuously reinterpreted. Accordingly, the “local” emerged as the object of agrarian governance out of a dynamic process of negotiation between changing meanings of generality and specificity. The chapter, however, also reclaims the “local” for political economy. I argue that the structuring principle of the “local”—a search for the authentic national property-power complex—was also the reconfigured epistemological object of contemporary political economy in Britain, namely, the “political”. As I have shown in the second chapter, Richard Jones made the political economic category of production contingent upon different interrelations between property and political power existing in different nations of the world. This chapter explores in detail the manner in which Jones analyzed the specificities of the property-power complex in India, relating them to categories like rent, wage, profit, and, production. From Jones, I move on to introduce John Stuart Mill’s political economy as another articulation of the “political”. I argue that Mill, in a way different from Jones, forged constitutive conceptual linkages between property, power and production. It is in this light that Mill interpreted agrarian conditions in Britain, India, Ireland, and other nations of the world. This is how the chapter brings together the “political” and the “local” as categories fashioned by similar, yet different meanings. I try to read them as part of the same analytical field.

This chapter shows that in the years after the permanent zemindary settlement of Bengal, the ryotwari mode of property-organization was envisioned in practices of governance as the ancient and authentic form of the “political” in India. It was argued, at different sites of governance, that the original proprietary relation on land was between the state and the peasant-cultivator, which existed in an erstwhile, Hindu India. This chapter argues that this vision was marked by a discursive elasticity which enabled administrators to reinterpret this relation differently in different localities, without moving away from its founding principle. That is, the proprietary peasant of the ryotwari, was refashioned variously, as a hereditary cultivator, or *khodkasht* ryot, as a village-proprietor, or *putteedar/mokuddum*, and even as particular kinds of *zamindars* and *talukdars*, whose roots were in the “village community”. I argue that this represented a governmental strategy of positing one landholding figure in each locality as its dominant one, based on arguments about its greater proximity to the original proprietary ryot than others. These arguments were formed by the category of the “local”. The “local” allowed administrators to rank different landholders in different localities in terms of their difference/distance from the authentic time of the ancient, and the original space of a Hindu India, which was viewed as the abode of the true “political”. But the choice of this figure, I argue, also emerged out of a preference for the productive potential of peasant-proprietors over big landlords. This preference was evident in John Stuart Mill’s political economy as well. But the productivist emphasis marking this choice, both in Mill, and in the practices of British Indian agrarian governance, was articulated in and through a complex interpretation of the interrelationship between property and political power in nations. In other words, it was a discourse of political economy, the constitutive categories of which were the “political” and the “local”. The question of production here was *internal* to that of local power.

There was another deployment of the “political” which played an equally important role in fashioning constellations of agrarian power in the localities. This was an interpretation of the property-power complex in India as diffused and dispersed. Within this framework, although the landlord-state was considered as an absolute/despotic source of power its despotism was seen as qualified, limited and arrested by a range of landholders and landholding bodies. The latter, along with the state, therefore, was perceived as forming a distributed matrix of agrarian power. In this understanding, property in India was seen to be a conjunction of proprietary rights

vested in both the soil and offices of revenue collection. The “political” was construed as a diffused field, constituted by zamindars, talukdars, village-proprietors, like mukaddams, serberakars, and pudhans, and cultivators, like the thanee or khoodkasht ryots, each having their share of rights, along with the state. Once again, this articulation of the “political” was shared between governance and political economy. It was deployed by administrators, and by Richard Jones, in explaining the specific nature of the relationship between property and political power in India.

I argue that the “local” and the “political”, over their different interconstitutive articulations, shaped agrarian relations in different localities of British India. This chapter traces these articulations through the *5th Report*, an insurrection in Cuttack, an authoritative text on tenures in Cuttack, debates over settlement in the North-Western Provinces, the Governor-General William Bentinck’s intervention in these debates, settlement practices in the different districts of Cuttack, and finally, the political-economic writings of Richard Jones and John Stuart Mill. In this dissertation they serve as routes of both entry and exit to Cuttack. More generally, however, I suggest that this mode of analysis indicates the entangled character of all localities. It shows that specific configurations of agrarian power in localities were not outcomes of contingent, on-the-spot, pragmatic administrative measures. On the contrary, specificities were implicated in, and constituted by complex but coherent networks of knowledge and governance.

### **Early connections: a report, a rebellion, and the ordering of difference**

To begin with, I take another look at the *5th Report*. The *5th Report*, as I noted in the previous chapter, represented the first systematic attempt to put together an assemblage of property relations and political power which would remain, over shifting arrangements, the object of agrarian governance in British India throughout the first half of the nineteenth century. I documented earlier how rent operated in this report as an indicator of these relations. But the report, as I had suggested, was primarily organized around the category of the “local”. This chapter brings forth the importance of this category in the assembling of the proprietary matrix. It argues that the “local” signified a spatio-temporal frame within which the “political”, as an ensemble of property and power, assumed a national form, and got distributed over

various geographical sites, or localities, as a hierarchized range of difference. In other words, the “political” of each locality was always interpreted by practices of governance as *specific* manifestations of a *general*, national, Hindu/Indian complex of property and political power. Moreover, this ordering of difference was framed by a hierarchy. A Hindu/Indian form of the “political” was construed as the authentic one, and proprietary power relations specific to each locality was assessed in terms of its distance/difference from the former. Within this interpretive grid, time and space were the twin markers of distance/difference. The “local” performed this analytical function. It was both a point and a range. It acted as both specificity and generality. In the “local”, time and space defined each other. Every locality, as a space *different* from the original, was also explained by practices of governance as a time *distant* from the ancient. The logic of the “local” was all-pervasive. This section argues that, from the *5th Report* to an insurgency in Cuttack, the “local” reigned supreme in assembling the “political”.

The *5th Report* criticized the Bengal Code of administration by pointing out its inapplicability in other localities. The report presented administrative experience from various regions of British India, as evidence of “local” differences in the forms of land tenures. This body of evidence emerged from experiences in governance in the old and new areas of the Bengal Presidency and also in the Presidency of Fort St. George. By demonstrating the unsuitability of the Bengal Code to some of both the old and newly-acquired territories of the Company, the Report pointed out that significant alterations were made in the revenue administration of these areas. These new arrangements were considered to be more sensitive to “local” conditions, and consequently, highly successful in effecting improvement in the material conditions of these places.

The model of permanent settlement of revenue with zemindars established by the Bengal Code faced severe opposition from a number of localities. In all these areas, government officers pointed out, “local” circumstances did not warrant the settlement of revenue with zemindars. Amongst the old territories of the Company, such a contradiction of the revenue policy of the code was first experienced in Benares in 1795. The principal landholders of Benares seemed to differ substantially from the figure of the zemindar enshrined in the Code. Proprietary rights in land in Benares were vested in groups described in the Report as “village zemindars”. “The village zemindar of Benares appears to be the mokuddum found in certain parts of



Bahar, and the Potal of the Carnatic, both of whom are headmen of villages, who are responsible to the government, for maintaining and promoting the cultivation of the land, and who in the first-mentioned portions of territory possessed the right of disposing of their situations by sale or gift to others...”<sup>1</sup>

The greatest challenge to the Bengal Code came from the new presidency of Fort St. George. The Report noted that in many parts of this presidency, “local” conditions did not allow an unmodified application of the Code. A number of representations from Collectors in different divisions, spearheaded by Thomas Munro’s vision of a new revenue arrangement produced significant changes in the revenue policy of the Bengal Code. In some parts of this presidency the revenue arrangement was made with individual cultivators or ryots, while in some other areas a “village settlement” was adopted by which the “chief cultivators” of villages engaged for the revenue.

Generally, the Report argued vigorously in favour of the mode of revenue settlement with the ryots. It stated that the ryotwar system of revenue management had contributed much to the improvement of the province. “It appears...that...operation of the ryot-war principle of collection, duly conducted and superintended; having for its leading objects, the confining every man to the cultivation of his own land, and defining the specific amount to be paid by each; and thus, securing to him the need of his own industry had, in the...two years, during which the country continued under this system of management, effected an improvement in its internal condition...”<sup>2</sup> The Report further pointed out that the exactions of the village headmen or the superior ryots had been disallowed by this mode of revenue settlement. “...pottahs signed by the collector and his assistants, were granted to each individual cultivator, specifying the rent he was to pay; the grammatans were prohibited from collecting any thing more from the ryots, than the pottah demand; while the latter became encouraged to resist the exactions of the native servants, from a confidence in the protecting power of the government...”<sup>3</sup>

Thus, the *5th Report* presented the category of “local” as an explanatory framework of difference. The “local” forms of land-tenures were identified as corrupt versions of an originary and authentic form of proprietary-relation, between the

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<sup>1</sup>“The Fifth Report from the Select Committee on the Affairs of the East India Company”, *P.P.*, 1812, 47.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid*, 155.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid*, 155.

government and the cultivator, which existed in the ancient times, when India was under Hindu rule. The report pointed out, that apart from the sovereign, only the ryots, or peasant cultivators held proprietary-rights in land. Other groups on land, like the “village headmen”, “chief cultivators” or the zemindars, emerged as usurpers of those rights during the subsequent period of a tyrannical Muslim rule. The report recognized certain areas of the presidency of Fort St. George as containing, in its form of land-tenures, traces of the original proprietary-relation. In this manner, it inaugurated the analytical mode by which a particular combination of property and political power got repeatedly represented as the “political” of the nation, and by extension, of each and every locality. Cuttack was soon harnessed into this analytical space, whereby the initial inexplicability of an insurgent moment in this new division of Bengal Presidency was quickly tamed by the calm assurance of the calculus of the “local”.

In the spirit of the *5th Report*, an oppositional stance to a permanent settlement was displayed with regard to revenue-administration in Cuttack as well. The Company acquired Cuttack in 1803. Since then, a number of short-term settlements of the land-revenue were carried out in the province. As I had mentioned earlier, in spite of the introduction of the Bengal code of regulations, the policy of permanent settlement was not extended to Cuttack. In 1817, an insurrection spread rapidly over parts of Cuttack. The insurrection was led by a group of Paiks, who were the landed military servants of the Rajah of Khoordah. After the conquest of Cuttack, in making revenue engagements with landholders of different kinds in the area, the new Government introduced changes in the mode of settlement of the estate of Khoordah. Prior to the British, when the area was ruled by the Marathas, the Raja of Khoordah paid only a nominal tribute to the rulers for the estate. But when the British occupied Cuttack, the Raja tried to resist them. The British defeated and deposed the Raja, and resumed his estate. Later, when the Raja was released, he was asked to engage for the estate, but only against a regular revenue payment. The Raja refused to consent to such an offer, due to which the government leased out his estate to revenue farmers. The estate consisted of several rent-free lands gifted to the paiks. These lands were resumed by the government as well. One of the Raja’s principal servants, high in rank, and commander of his paiks, was Bakshi Jagabandhu. The Bakshi owned several rent-free lands, which were resumed by the Company’s government.

These matters appear to be a necessary background to the acts of agitation in Khoordah, as these acts were led by Jagabandhu Bakshi, and committed in the Raja's name. At least, the Cuttack-based government officials were quite emphatic in claiming that the Raja was centrally implicated in these acts, as soon as the rebellion broke out. Thus, the Magistrate reported to authorities in Calcutta that, "I have no doubt of the proceedings of the Insurgents being countenanced and secretly encouraged by the Rajah Makoond Dea, they repeatedly call upon his name in their violent acts, and the Buxee Jugbundoo issues all orders in the Raja's name, whilst their intention is declared to be, to proceed to Poory, and convey, the Raja into his own territory..."<sup>4</sup>

Authorities in Fort William, the headquarters of Bengal Presidency, however, perceived the event in a very different way. From the very beginning, they saw the insurrection as symptomatic of a general failure of governance in the province.<sup>5</sup> Due to this perception a number of investigations were carried out in different branches of the administration in Cuttack. Questions of land-revenue occupied a substantial space in these enquiries. The Revenue Department at Fort William noted that, "...We see reason to apprehend both that the Bengal system of Revenue Law has in some respects, been ill-adapted to the District of Cuttack, and that the executive management of the Revenue affairs has been defective..."<sup>6</sup>

I argue that the authenticity of the "political" got posed as the central object of contention in the aftermath of the insurrection in Cuttack in the same way it was framed in the *5th Report*. In fact, the structure of reasoning within which the act of insurrection got explained in Cuttack emerged entirely from the prevailing discourse on the "political", articulations of which, as I have shown in the previous chapter,

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<sup>4</sup>"Magistrate of Cuttack (Secret) to Secretary to Government, Judicial Department, Fort William", 4 April, 1817, *BJC*, IOR.

<sup>5</sup>Authorities at Fort William in Calcutta, however, understood the chain of events at Cuttack in a different way. Right from the beginning, they seemed to discern signs of a bigger field of discontent, which went beyond the angst of one disempowered indigenous ruler. That's why, within a month of the reporting of the insurrection, the Secretary of the Judicial Department pointed out that, "...although I have discovered nothing calculated to remove the suspicion, that the Rajah of Khoordah is the immediate instigator of the disturbances at present prevailing in the Southern parts of Cuttack, I lament to state that there are some grounds to believe that a much more general spirit of disaffection at present exists in that District..." Mr. Dowdeswell's Minute, "Secretary to Government, Judicial Department, Fort William", 11 April, 1817, *BJC*.

<sup>6</sup>"Extract Revenue Letter from Revenue Department, Bengal to Governor-General in Council, Fort William", 17 July, 1818, *Proceedings connected with the recent Disturbances in Cuttack, Examiner's Office, 1819 (Volume 1)*.

could be found at every level of the imperial bureaucracy.<sup>7</sup> In order to decide upon a policy of revenue-administration in Cuttack, the Court of Directors in London urged the Bengal Government to gather, “...more complete information...regarding the system of Village Policy prevalent in Cuttack, particularly the nature of the rights and privileges enjoyed by the different class of persons who have an interest in the soil from the zemindar down to the actual cultivator of the land...”<sup>8</sup> The question of a permanent settlement, and the question of the authentic proprietor of land with whom the settlement was to be made were considered as interrelated ones; they could only be decided through a minute investigation into tenures.

Following these orders, the Collector and the Commissioner in Cuttack reported on the forms of land tenures in Cuttack. Both of them pointed out that in Cuttack, previous to the British occupation, the agents of Government in revenue affairs were not zemindars. They were mostly village headmen, with different names in different parts of the district. The Commissioner, Walter Ewer, pointed out in a part of his report, that “...by the ancient original institutions of the country the ryots of every *Mouzah* under the immediate direction and management of their Pudhon

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<sup>7</sup>This insurrection in Cuttack, better-known as the Paik Rebellion, has been uniformly viewed by a number of historical works as an extremely important historical event which forced the colonial authorities to correct a number of abuses in governance of the region. See K. M. Patra, *Orissa Under the East India Company*, New Delhi, 1971, Yaaminey Mubayi, ‘The Paik Rebellion of 1817: Status and Conflict in Early Colonial Orissa’, *Studies in History*, 15, 1, 1999, 43-74, and Binod S. Das, *Studies in the Economic History of Orissa from Ancient Times to 1833*, Calcutta, 1978.

What these studies fail to realize is that the event of the insurrection was analyzed by the authorities at Fort William in terms of an overall failure in governance only because there was an emergent critical attitude already instituted within the discourse of governance at different levels of the imperial apparatus by that time. Accordingly, both the perceived problems of governance and their solution were pre-figured by the category of the “local”. However, the framework of the “local” emerged only in the domain of property governance. Consequently, in Cuttack, in the other areas of perceived misgovernance, like high prices and poor availability of salt, and depreciation of the cowrie currency, the logic of the “local” did not operate. Official debates over salt and cowrie can be found in S. C. De (ed.) *Guide to Orissan Records, Volume II*, Bhubaneswar, 1961, 19-35, 56, 65-80, and “Report of Walter Ewer, 18 April, 1818”, *Revenue Proceedings Relative to the Late Disturbances in Cuttack*, Vol. 2, Examiner’s Office, 1819, IOR.

It is evident that a deviation from the Bengal Code in all areas of governance, according to the singular circumstances of Cuttack, was not implemented despite the official perception that the rebellion was fuelled by a total failure in governance. Rather, the government sanctioned a move away from the Bengal code only in the realm of property relations. And this was done even though there were strong opinions in favor of a Bengal model of permanent settlement amongst many officials. Thus, I argue that the “local”, which was the operative category in the official analysis of the rebellion and the perceived misgovernance of Cuttack, was merely staged as an on-ground, organic reality of Cuttack. Its production was rooted in the “political”; its limits were also set by the same framework. Studies of the Paik rebellion, I argue, replicate the official framing of the “local”, by pointing out that the rebellion forced the government to implement reforms. As I have shown, these reforms, and their limits were pre-figured by those imperatives of the “local” which had nothing to do with the event of the rebellion in Cuttack.

<sup>8</sup>“Secretary to Government, Territorial Department”, 24 October, 1817 in S. C. De (ed.) *Guide to Orissan Records, Volume II*, Bhubaneswar, 1961, 116.

Mundel or Moquddum were the only class besides the sovereign who could claim a proprietary right in the soil...they once enjoyed the privilege of paying their revenue direct to the state, and...no middleman had anciently a right to intervene between them and the Government...”<sup>9</sup> But the Commissioner also argued that it was difficult to trace historically at what point of time the system changed. During the British occupation, it was found that in both Khoordah and other parts of the district, the mokuddums were preponderantly in charge of revenue affairs. Ewer further noted that historically Cuttack was divided into two administrative units, one known as Rajwareh, and the other, as Mughalbundee. Khoordah was the principal unit of the Rajwareh, the seat of the ancient Raja of Orissa. Ewer argued that, “...the Political state of Khoorda...previous to the conquest...by the British arms exhibited an exact picture in miniature of the condition of Orissa under its ancient native sovereigns antecedent to the Mogul invasion and...that condition much resembled what I am informed is still observable in some of the Hindoo states of Hindostan and the Deccan.”<sup>10</sup> The Collector and the Commissioner then inferred that since in the ancient times, the entire province of Cuttack was the territory of the Raja of Khoordah, the forms of land tenures in Khoordah would indicate the original system of revenue management prevailing throughout the division. In this manner, they came to the conclusion that the “...the pudhan in Khoordah appears to be precisely what the mokuddums are in the Moghulbundee...”<sup>11</sup> The Commissioners report finally recommended future settlements to be made with mokuddums or pudhans, as the supposedly original, ancient revenue-managers of the country.

The *5th Report*’s preference for the ryotwaree and classification of different forms of property rights were echoed in discussions at Cuttack. I argue that the ryotwaree principle was reworked in establishing the pudhans/mokuddums as the legitimate revenue officers. Since the original peasant cultivator who shared a proprietary-right with the state could not be recovered in Cuttack, the pudhans/mokuddums were considered nearest to, and the zemindar furthest from, the original proprietary figure. They were perceived to have a proprietary right in the office of revenue-collection, unlike the ancient ryot, who had a proprietary right in the

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<sup>9</sup>“Report of Walter Ewer, 18 April, 1818 in *Revenue Proceedings Relative to the Late Disturbances in Cuttack*, Vol. 2, Examiner’s Office, 1819, IOR, emphasis mine.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

<sup>11</sup>“W. Trower, Collector of Cuttack to Walter Ewer, Commissioner of Cuttack”, 3 April, 1818 in *Revenue Proceedings Relative to the Late Disturbances in Cuttack*, Vol. 2, 297, Examiner’s Office, 1819, IOR.

soil. But, as the chapter will demonstrate gradually, the “political”, as an assemblage of property and political power, was considered to include proprietary rights both in the soil and in the offices of revenue-collection. Within that scheme, therefore, the pudhans/mokuddums could be incorporated as legitimate “proprietors”. It is evident that the figure of the pudhan was re-discovered with a corresponding reconstruction of a putative ancient Hindoo form of administration in Orissa, the present territorial remnant of which was taken as Khoordah, the seat of the Raja. It is by re-imagining the forms of land tenures in Khoordah as the symbols of an ancient Hindu administration, and projecting this imagination onto the rest of Cuttack, that the authenticity of the pudhan was consolidated. This is how the “local” of Cuttack was reintegrated to the “political” of the nation. This principle of ordering difference was inaugurated in the *5th Report*, and re-enacted in Cuttack. Figures and relations, existing at that time on the lands of Cuttack were visualized as living embodiments of an authentic spatio-temporal point—the Hindu/Indian “political”. The next section will show how this spatio-temporal architecture was developed in terms of its generality as well as its specificity. It will show how “Cuttack” and “India” got related, and secured their respective seats in the classificatory topography of the “political”.

### **Conceiving the “political”: property, “Cuttack” and “India”**

Immediately after the rebellion, in 1821, Andrew Stirling, one of the leading administrators of Cuttack, wrote the “Minute on Tenures in Orissa”. The minute was subsequently published, in 1822, in the form of a book, entitled, “An Account, Geographical, Statistical and Historical of Orissa Proper, Or Cuttack”. I regard Stirling’s work as both the first systematic treatise on the land tenures of Cuttack, and also as one of those expositions which, forged a definitive link between the “political” of “Cuttack” and “India”. Quite naturally, this work also acted as an authoritative reference for administrators in Cuttack, throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, as and when land tenures and governance met each other. In a sense, Stirling’s propositions rearticulated the representations of the “political” that informed the official reaction to the rebellion. But his work, by developing the assumptions inherent in those discussions, outlined the horizon of their potential. Stirling’s text described the lands of Cuttack as inhabited by an immense variety of figures, only in

order to invest each one of them with the traces of the “political” that encapsulated lands all over “India”. Here, the staging of diversity was constitutive of a centralizing operation, which eventually harnessed, and reintegrated all its elements to a single analytical trope.

Stirling began with a natural division of the lands. He noted that the country may be divided into three regions which were, “The marshy woodland tract which extends along the sea shore...The plain and open country between this and the hills...and...The hill country.”<sup>12</sup> He immediately re-described these three divisions as two, in terms of the land-tenures that populated them. He noted that, “The first and third are known to the natives as the Eastern and Western Rajwara or Zemindara, that is, the country occupied by the ancient feudal Chieftains, Khandaits, Zemindars or Poligars of Orissa; and the second, as the Mogulbundi or Khaliseh, being that from which the indigenous sovereigns and the Mogul conquerors of the country, derived the chief part of their land revenue...”<sup>13</sup> I have shown in the previous section that a similar division of the lands of Cuttack was made in the report on tenures following the rebellion, and the “Rajwara” was identified as the authentic form of the “political”; its tenures consisting of the remnants of the ancient Hindu form of administration. But Stirling’s scheme had greater ambitions. It conjured up a gigantic spatio-temporal canvas on which the “political” of Cuttack was joined to not only an ancient Hindu India, but to lands and times far beyond it.

In his first move, he took the “political” to a different part of the world. He remarked that, “In surveying attentively the ancient Political Institutions of Orissa as connected with the tenure of land, it is impossible not to be struck with the marked resemblance which many of their features exhibit to the system of European policy called the feudal, at certain stages of its progress.”<sup>14</sup> In the very next line he increased the scope of this comparison. He noted that, “I am strongly inclined to think that the comparison might be extended to India generally, and that a careful enquirer would not fail to discern in every quarter of the country, obvious traces of the former existence of such a system, however irregularly defined, and liable to variation in the details, from local peculiarities.”<sup>15</sup> Thus, he established that interpretive frame which

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<sup>12</sup>A. Stirling, *An Account, Geographical, Statistical and Historical of Orissa Proper, Or Cuttack*, 1822, 5.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid*, 6.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid*, 56.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid*, 56-57.

explained the “local” of land-tenures, as variations of an original “political” form, which existed under a Hindu form of administration, and, thereby, represented the authentic “Indian” form of property in land. In support of his representations, Stirling referred to similar opinions of other experienced administrators, working in different parts of British India.

He argued that Sir J. Malcolm, in his report on Malwa, noted that land-administration in the Rajpoot principalities differed little from the feudal system that existed in Europe. Stirling further observed that “every one knows that the Rajput, is only one branch or epithet of the great Regal and Military Caste amongst the Hindus, called the Cshetriya (Khetri), and anciently *all* principalities and kingdoms might in one sense be designated as Rajput.”<sup>16</sup> Similar views, Stirling argued, were held by Captain MacMurdo in a paper on the province of Cutch. Like the feudal form of administration in Europe, where power rested entirely on the possession of land, Stirling noted that, there existed a giant kingdom in India in the ancient times, “...ruled by a sovereign residing at Hastinapura and Delhi...”, under whom the lands of the country were divided amongst a “vast number of great Military Chiefs and Feudatory Rajas, of the Khetri Caste, who were dependent on and owed service to the Lord Paramount.”<sup>17</sup> Stirling went on describing the administrative form of this kingdom, or empire as he put it, in the mirror of an archetypal European feudal system. He pointed out that the kings subordinate to the emperor, “...the great officers of state called the Gajapati, Aswapati, Chatrapati, and Narapati...” were initially “...dependent fiefs subject to the condition of Military service...”<sup>18</sup>, but later established themselves as independent overlords of their territories. This was the scale of the “local”. It encompassed a spatio-temporal range, which could simultaneously incorporate Cuttack, an ancient Hindu (Rajput) India, and a feudal Europe.<sup>19</sup> From here, Stirling proceeded to a meticulous grounding of the “political” in the lands of Cuttack.

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid, 57.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid, 58.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid.

<sup>19</sup>Norbert Peabody argues that James Tod made similar use of the category “feudal” in describing the social and political organization of the Rajputs of Rajasthan. Peabody notes that, “...Tod argued that the tribes of early Europe and ‘the Rajpoot tribes’ had a common Scythic origin in Central Asia and, in the more recent past, the Rajputs of western India had a feudal system similar to that which had existed in parts of Europe.” See Norbert Peabody, “Tod’s Rajasthan and the Boundaries of Imperial Rule in Nineteenth-Century India”, *Modern Asian Studies*, 30, 1, 1996, 198.



Orissa was under one of those regional sovereigns, Stirling observed, who became independent of the mighty emperor. He argued that the land-tenures presently existing in the area denominated Rajwareh showed that this region was the abode of a number of military chieftains, among whom lands were distributed by the Gajapati, the great sovereign of Orissa. Stirling noted that the principle of administrative independence existing between the emperor and the regional sovereigns was reproduced in the relation between the Gajapati and his subordinate chiefs as well. Thus, he pointed out, that, “These Chiefs may be safely considered as de facto proprietors of their possessions...that is to say they held them hereditarily, exercised uncontrollable territorial jurisdiction within their limits, and appropriated the entire revenues, subject to the condition of performing Military service, or other offices and duties, at the court of their superior Raja, the Gajapati...”<sup>20</sup> However, in Stirling’s opinion, the other part of Cuttack, the Mughalbandi, was under the direct authority of the Gajapati, and consequently, of his successors, like the Moguls, Marathas and English.

Property and political power was viewed as an interconstitutive complex by Stirling. The various proprietary relations characterizing the lands of the Rajwareh and the Mughalbandi were seen as deeply imbricated in different forms of political power. The chiefs inhabiting the Rajwareh, whom Stirling called the “feudal lords”, all belonged to the Cshetriya caste. In his opinion, they were variously known as Khandait, Bhuyan, Poligar, Sawant, Sirdar and finally, zemindar. Under the Mogul government, Raja Man Singh, conferred on the two sons of Telinga Mukund Deo, the last independent monarch of Orissa, the title of the reigning prince. He noted that these chiefs “held their situations hereditarily, and were in the habits of mortgaging or even selling the whole or shares of them, with the sanction of the ruling power...”<sup>21</sup> But, he further pointed out that this never implied a right of property in the soil itself. That right, he argued, can be imagined to have belonged only to the actual cultivators of the soil under the ancient Hindu government, but he did not find any traces of it in Cuttack. Further, almost echoing the discussion in the *5th Report*, he noted that such a right is existent in Canara and Malabar, pointing out that, “I have never yet been able

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<sup>20</sup>Ibid, 59.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid, 65.

to discover any well authenticated instance of the *sale* or *mortgage* of land by a Malguzari ryot of the province.”<sup>22</sup>

Stirling now turned to the Mughalbandi, and its proprietary forms. The Mughalbandi, under the Mughal administration, ceased to be the territory of the Gajapati, and came under the direct management of the Mughals. Stirling remarked that the ministers of Akbar, however, did not change the system of revenue management in that area; they only translated the Oriya names into Persian ones. The revenue officers of the state here were known by the names of Chowdris, Talukdars, Vilaity Canoongoes, Mokuddums and others. Describing the nature of their attachment to the land, Stirling noted, that, “Amongst the chief of their duties were the collection of the Government Revenue assessed on their several divisions, the control of Police, the adjustment of disputes relating to the Pergunnah generally, and the enforcement of all the government orders and instructions relative to the assignment and proportion of lands.”<sup>23</sup> Against the performance of such tasks, they received certain perquisites on the natural resources, and a certain percentage on the revenue, of that area.

Such a neat differentiation between chiefs of petty principalities, and revenue-officers of the state collapsed totally with the introduction of the British government, and its principles of land-administration. Henceforth, Stirling argued, that, “all parties whose names appeared in the public accounts of the preceding administration as answerable for or entrusted with the collection of the public dues, were forthwith acknowledged not only as Zemindars, but as proprietors of the land comprised in their Zemindaris.”<sup>24</sup> Actually, till the times of Aurangzebe, this separation was in place. After that, revenue-managers were often falsely designated as zemindars. Thus, Stirling observed, that “...we must unhesitatingly class the Zemindari so created, as nothing higher than a Talukdari, or a mere official trust...”<sup>25</sup> As such a practice became regular, the erstwhile Chowdris and Canungo Talukdars styled themselves as zemindars, while the “proper Zemindars”, according to Stirling, adopted the title of “Rajahs”. This process of contamination reached its culmination under the British government, when every description of persons engaging for the payment of revenue, were marked in the official accounts as zemindars. Thus, Stirling noted that, “We may

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<sup>22</sup>Ibid.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid, 74.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid, 76.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid, 78.

distinguish no less than seven different grades of persons holding offices and tenures connected with land, who appear in the Collector's accounts as Zemindars, and absolute proprietors of the soil..."<sup>26</sup> These were the "ancient Zemindars (now Rajahs)...Zemindars of Mogul or Mahratta creation...Chowdhri and Canungo Talukdars...(Mazkuri) Mokuddums...Village accountants, called Serberakars, and Karjis...head-men (Poorsettis) of Patnas...holders of lands...called Kheridah..."<sup>27</sup>

Stirling argued that the British government misconstrued each of these revenue-officers of the state, existing in the Mughalbandi, as the absolute proprietors of lands. The confusion, he noted, existed at two levels. Firstly, as I have already pointed out, Stirling argued that the zemindars in the accounts of the British administrators were actually revenue-managers employed by the state. The true zemindars, Stirling further emphasized, by presenting excerpts from authoritative works in the history of "India", such as the "Ayin Acberi" and Ferishte's text, were "feudal" chiefs, possessing "...a title of property, and accountable to their sovereign only for the performance of such services, military or otherwise, as the condition of their tenure imposed..."<sup>28</sup> Secondly, he noted that as revenue-managers, the tenure-holders in the Mughalbandi, held "...offices connected with the land, of different degrees of authority and importance, each having its distinct duties and perquisites..."<sup>29</sup> These offices were hereditary, and deeds of sale which made the British believe that they reflected sales of lands, were actually sales of positions of management. When these offices fell into arrears, the Mughal government transferred them, by sale, to other managers. But the authority of such management was always partial, and distributed amongst a collectivity of various other managers. That is why, Stirling argued, such deeds of sale were addressed to the entire body of proprietary interest-holders, "...the Amils, Mutsuddis, Chowdris, Canoongos, Mokuddams, ryots, and cultivators..."<sup>30</sup> Such addresses, Stirling also noted, were never issued to the authentic zemindars.

As it is evident, Stirling's text was an operation in disentangling the different lineages of the "political". Stirling separated the Rajwareh from the Mughalbandi on the basis of the different relations between property and political power that marked

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<sup>26</sup>Ibid, 78.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid, 77.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid, 87.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid, 84.

these lands. Proprietary rights in the soil itself, according to Stirling's representations, could never be located in the varied repertoire of tenures in Cuttack. That kind of proprietary-right, if existent at all, could only be found in those lands where the tenures reflected the mode of administration of an ancient Hindu kingdom. A proprietary right in the soil, belonging only to the peasant cultivators, however, did not exhaust the domain of property in "India". For Stirling landed-property in India existed both in the soil, and in the offices of revenue-management. Most importantly, these two forms of proprietary rights reflected the different ways in which property and political power were related. In the form of tenure imprinted with ancient Hindu administrative principles, the sovereign and the peasant cultivators were co-proprietors of the land, whereas in the other forms, it was a collective of various revenue-managers whose proprietary-rights were vested in their offices. Taken together, they constituted the "political", and, consequently, the object of agrarian governance.

But the varying respectability of their lineages implied that they were framed within a hierarchy. Although Stirling emphasized that the British government confused the two, his efforts to clear this confusion by digging up their pasts meant that the hierarchy was retained. The upcoming sections will show how this hierarchy was creatively reinterpreted during the settlement of Cuttack to infuse the various proprietary figures with new lineages and new identities. The "local" was invoked, time and again, as a spatio-temporal grid distributing the "political" of "India", in and beyond Cuttack, as embodied complexes of multiple relations of power—between various landholding groups, and also between the former and the state.

### **Cultivators and proprietors: new connections in the landscape of difference**

As I noted earlier, right from the beginning of the nineteenth century, express instructions were communicated to authorities in British India from the Court of Directors in London, of knowing in detail the various interests connected with land in the newly-acquired territories of the Company. Orders from London emphasized that any decision on a long-lasting settlement could be taken only on the basis of such knowledge. I have already demonstrated that similar opinions on the issue were articulated in Cuttack, after the rebellion. But the hot seat of contention involving all questions of settlement, during the first three decades of the nineteenth century, was

located elsewhere. The biggest territorial acquisition of the Company at the turn of the century was a region administratively classified as the “Ceded and Conquered Provinces”. Situated in the north-west of India, this area was conquered between 1801 and 1803. It consisted of the districts of Bareilly, Moradabad, Farrakhabad, Etawah, Kanpur, Allahabad, Gorakhpur, Saharanpur, Aligarh, Agra, and Bundelkhand.<sup>31</sup>

The history of settlements in this region was similar to that of Cuttack. From the time of its conquest, a series of short-term settlements were carried out under the promise of a permanent settlement in the near future. However, the promise was never fulfilled. As Imtiaz Husain notes, “The Bengal Government under Lord Wellesley had promised a permanent settlement for the Ceded and Conquered Provinces. But between 1807 and 1813 the applicability of that policy to those regions was earnestly discussed, and a radical departure from the Bengal system of land settlement emerged.”<sup>32</sup> Subsequently, a new mode of settlement for this region was gradually assembled under the administrative leadership of Holt Mackenzie, secretary to the Territorial Department of the Government of Bengal. In this section, I will closely examine the vision of the “political” which informed this new model of settlement. Once again a variety of power-relations between landholders of different descriptions and the state were established as the object of agrarian governance. Out of an entangled condition, these relations were classified into varying degrees of authenticity, by drawing up connections within their spatio-temporal lineages. In the process, the “political” emerged as similar to, yet different from its previous articulations.

On the one hand, the complex of property and political power was conceived as diffused and dispersed. It was considered to be distributed, in varying capacities amongst the state, and various kinds of landholders. It was seen as a shared domain of power where the state, the big landholders like zemindars and talukdars, and the small landholders like village-headmen and cultivating peasants of various kinds all enjoyed varying degrees of proprietary rights. These proprietary rights were seen to be vested in both offices of revenue-collection and the soil itself. On the other hand, there was an urge to fashion this welter of rights along the lines of a perfect ryotwari condition, by extracting the figure of the cultivating peasant, and investing him with superior

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<sup>31</sup>Imtiaz Husain, *Land Revenue Policy in North India: The Ceded and Conquered Provinces, 1801-33*, Calcutta & New Delhi, 1967, 3.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid, 60.

proprietary rights. His superiority over others in this matrix was argued for on the basis of the respectability of his lineage. He was viewed as the surviving form of that proprietor, who, in ancient times, shared the right of property in the soil with the state. However, even in the North-Western Provinces, like Cuttack, the cultivating peasant-proprietor could rarely be found in its pristine, ancient, original form. In most cases he was seen as both continuity and change, embodying a history of loss. He was characterized by an absent presence. His full presence, therefore, could be only be recovered by the operation of the “local”, which made visible the loss through traces left in time and space.<sup>33</sup>

In 1819, Holt Mackenzie wrote a memorandum on the land and people of the Ceded and Conquered Provinces, reflecting on the past settlements in the region, and putting forward a detailed plan for a future one. Mackenzie noted that the memorandum was written in response to the concerns expressed by the Court of Directors. The Court wanted to obtain, he pointed out, “not merely...more ample information...respecting the general nature and the resources of the districts...and the quality and value of the produce; but...a full and particular detail of all local tenures and usages...”<sup>34</sup> In presenting his vision of a settlement, Mackenzie noted that the most important part of settlement accounts was that relating to land-tenures. He seemed to be following a perception similar to Stirling that since proprietary rights in land are plural and partial, it is imperative to protect each, because superior holders have the tendency of usurping the rights of inferior ones. Thus, he emphasized the, “...importance of...ascertaining the nature and extent of the rights, interests, and privileges of the various classes of persons connected with the land, and...if such a course be not followed, all will be sacrificed to the Sudder Malgoozar, whose interest

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<sup>33</sup>Thomas Metcalfe argues that the settlement policy of the Ceded and Conquered Provinces was entirely a pragmatic response to the on-ground reality of the area, as the landholders here were different from those of Bengal. He notes that, “The British carried with them to the newly conquered territories of northern India the preconceptions derived from their quarter century’s experience of Bengal. They set out to find large zemindars of the sort they were accustomed to.....The relative scarcity of large landholders in the Doab and Rohilkhand meant that the British had in the long run no option but to deal directly with the village-level zemindars and coparcenary communities.” Thomas R. Metcalf, *Land, Landlords, and the British Raj: Northern India in the Nineteenth Century*, Berkeley, 1979, 52, 54. Metcalfe fails to view the policy as reflective of a shift in the administrative discourse, engendered by the critique of zemindars. Further, he also ignores the consistent deployment of the analytical frame of political history and political geography, or the “local”, which, as I have shown, fashioned the problematic of property in every locality during this period. Metcalfe’s perspective exemplifies a pragmatist reading of the administrative practices of British rule.

<sup>34</sup>“Memorandum by the Secretary regarding the past settlements of the Ceded and Conquered Provinces, with heads of a Plan for the permanent settlement of those Provinces—dated 1<sup>st</sup> July 1819”, *Selections from Revenue Records, North-West Provinces, 1822-1833*, Allahabad, 1872, 60.

in the land, or the revenue of the land, if left undefined, is not naturally conceived to be that of absolute and exclusive property, and whose means of destroying or evading the rights of his inferior tenants are so powerful...”<sup>35</sup> This shows that even Mackenzie, echoing Stirling and the representations of the *5th Report*, posited proprietary-rights in lands, or land-tenures, as contingent on myriad power-relations between inferior and superior landholders.

Difference, however, had its own role to play in the Ceded and Conquered Provinces. The discussion on proprietary-rights here grafted itself on new figures and new relationships. Mackenzie noted that, in spite of the presence of big landholders, such as the talukdars, the proprietary-rights of a particular form of subordinate holder, described as the village zemindars were recognized by the administrators in this region. He pointed out that, “...the rights of the village Zemindars, *as the chief cultivators and sole owners of the land...* were fully recognized, even where the revenue of Government were received from Talukdars or other superior holders...”<sup>36</sup> Henceforth, Mackenzie directed all his energies in disentangling the figure of the village Zemindar from a complex web of relations on land. He represented most of these relations as spurious, deceitful, or subordinate, in relation to that true relation of property in land, which he claimed to be the privilege of the village zemindar. In claiming greater authenticity for him, Mackenzie simultaneously defined many more figures, who were construed as related to land in other, less authentic, proprietary capacities.

The talukdar, he argued, “...appears seldom to have pretended to be more than the Collector of the revenue of Government, claiming, indeed, sometimes a hereditary interest in the advantages of the office, but urging no pretension to a property in the soil...”<sup>37</sup> These tenures, he pointed out, were created in the recent past. The village zemindars, on the other hand, “...were the immemorial occupants of the soil; they cultivated generation from generation. They gave, sold and mortgaged their lands at will...”<sup>38</sup> But the true proprietary rights of these village zemindars, were often appropriated by the encroaching tendencies of superior holders like talukdars. Mackenzie argued that district administrators made no effort in knowing the real nature of these tenures. Originally, the proprietary right of these village Zemindars

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<sup>35</sup>Ibid, 75.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid, 88, emphasis mine.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid, 89.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid.

was an absolute one, that is, they had both a right to the soil as well as a right to their share of the income from it. But in certain situations, they had to give up this right to superior holders. These superior holders came into existence at times, by the gradual purchase of individual villages from their owners. Also, whenever any one amongst the leading men of the “village Zemindars” was appointed by the government to collect the revenue from a number of villages, “...he appears to have engaged in a constant struggle for the extension of his Zemindari property, and as he generally had the hand of power and a preponderating influence with the Amil, the various villages composing the Talooks or farm were too frequently converted by force or fraud into one Zemindari estate...”<sup>39</sup> In this way, Mackenzie noted, wherever the talukdari tenure prevailed, the talukdar asserted the superiority of his proprietary-rights, by presenting evidence of a variety of transactions, like sales, gifts or mortgages, with the original village zemindars. But in spite of such superior claims, Mackenzie emphasized, since the latter had an inviolable right to the soil, even when they have been forced to dispose of their property, they “...would still continue to cultivate their paternal fields, and the leading men among them, preserving their influence in the village, might naturally be employed to manage it on behalf of the purchaser, in the character of a *Ryot Mocuddum*.”<sup>40</sup>

There were other instances, however, where the village zemindars were found existing as undisturbed, sole proprietors of their lands. Mackenzie described them as putteedari tenures, where lands of the villages were held by a multitude of sharers called putteedars. In Bundlecund, for example, he noted that, “...all the persons from whom the Government revenue was collected, appear to have been Village Zemindars, themselves the cultivators of the soil...”<sup>41</sup> Mackenzie also observed that this did not necessarily mean that these village zemindars were the only cultivators of the soil. They often hired cultivators, and slaves, depending on their caste, and the extent of their possessions. The cultivators of the field, Mackenzie noted were primarily of two kinds. The *khodkasht* ryot were firmly attached to their cultivating fields, possessing a prescriptive right of occupancy, dependent on the payment of a rent, based on fixed rates. The *pykasht* ryots, on the contrary, were travelling cultivators, without a fixed residence in those villages, the lands of which they

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<sup>39</sup>Ibid, 91.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid, 91.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid, 92.



cultivated. Mackenzie described the form of tenures these cultivators held primarily with reference to the way they were related to the village zemindars. Thus, where the village Zemindars were cultivating proprietors, he considered "...the only real description of Khoodkasht Ryots to be of the family of the Zemindar..."<sup>42</sup> He further emphasized that although the khoodkhasht ryots in Bengal did not presently enjoy such proprietary privileges, the way this tenure was imbricated in the authentic proprietary-form of the village Zemindar in the North-Western provinces, it clearly makes ground for the assumption that, "...the resident Ryots of Bengal were originally of the same class with the Village Zemindars...vested with an equal right of property in the soil they occupied..."<sup>43</sup>

Mackenzie's representations, I argue, created an opening for imagining a new form of proprietary-body on land, by retaining, yet reinterpreting the older inventory of the "political". With the arrival of the figure of the village Zemindar, the longstanding administrative imagination of the ryot, or the cultivating proprietor as the authentic proprietor, reflective of the ancient Hindu/Indian mode of administration, was significantly redefined. Here the logic of the "local" was again instrumental. Invoking it, Mackenzie could establish the village Zemindar as the genuine proprietor, by locating his origin in the ryot or the peasant cultivator. Wherever he was not found as a cultivating proprietor, Mackenzie could argue that his proprietary capacities got lost over time. This time was seen as one of corruption and invasion, when the predatory habits of big landlord spoilt the pristine status of the proprietor-ryot. As I have shown, Mackenzie attributed such predatory habits to the leading figures of the collectives of cultivating proprietors as well. He noted that these "headmen" often usurped the proprietary status of the individual cultivators by falsely posing as the exclusive proprietor amongst them. Once again, the "local" defined time and space in terms of each other. The present time was seen as embodying corruptions of past time, just as the present space/land of the North-Western Provinces, and even Bengal, was viewed as the degenerated form of an ancient Hindu India.

But Mackenzie's deliberations, while remaining grounded within the earlier tradition of representations of the "political", also indicated certain new political-economic assumptions. These political-economic bearings were quite forceful. They often exploded out of his descriptions as his preferences. Mackenzie noted, while

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<sup>42</sup>Ibid, 96.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid, 97.

discussing the village Zemindars, that it is greatly beneficial to have such a class of “cultivating yeomanry” as the engagers of Government revenue. He argued that it is certainly better to have such a group as rent-holders than the zemindars of Bengal. “...I confess I see little or no chance of the great zemindars (or hereditary collectors) ever becoming capable of taking part in any regular or good system of internal government...”<sup>44</sup> It is evident, I argue, that Mackenzie’s representations of proprietary rights in land was deeply imprinted with the preference for a certain vision of “improvement”, the agent of which was the figure of the cultivating-proprietor. In my opinion, the “political” in the North-Western provinces was defined in a double-edged manner. It consisted of the simultaneous articulations of framing property as a constellation of power-relations, and of an attempt to posit the “cultivating proprietor”, or the village Zemindar as the chief agent of “improvement” within this power-ridden space. Both these modes of reckoning the “political”, prevalent in the agrarian governance of early nineteenth-century British India, were also visible in contemporary political economy. But I will turn to that later. For the moment, it is important to note that what came out of these debates was, in turn, highly important for Cuttack. The settlement of Cuttack, as I have shown earlier, was carried out under a Regulation which emerged out of the settlement experience of the North-Western Provinces.

### **A place for everyone: maintaining the calculus of power**

Mackenzie’s representations were to form the bulwark of the official regulation following which the first survey and settlement took place in Cuttack between 1837 and 1843. But there was a considerable difference between Mackenzie’s enunciations and the final formulation they acquired as a legislative enactment. In this section, I will follow those deliberations over which the “political”, as the object of agrarian governance, reached its most definite articulation in the first half of the nineteenth century.

It emerges from the previous section that Mackenzie conceived of the village Zemindars as a collective of cultivating-proprietors, found to exist in its most uncontaminated form in the putteedari tenure. Preference for a certain vision of

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<sup>44</sup>Ibid, 77.

“improvement”, with the figure of the cultivating-proprietor as its agent, informed this understanding. That is why Mackenzie wanted the engagements to be made with one or two representatives of the multitude of village Zemindars composing the putteedari tenure. But at the same time, he proposed that the rights of the rest should be recorded in detail.<sup>45</sup> Arguing against a mode of settling revenue with each cultivating-proprietor of the collective individually, Mackenzie observed that, “...It would not perhaps be desirable to dissolve the village association by a rapid and extensive admission of the cultivators of the soil to engagements with Government...”<sup>46</sup> Mackenzie’s posture towards the collective body of proprietors expressed an amalgam of two representative frames which simultaneously constituted the “political” in early nineteenth-century British India. One of these frames established that proprietary-rights were vested in a dispersed and contingent cluster of power-relationships, with a collective of cultivating-proprietors embodying its most authentic form. This explains why it was considered necessary, within Mackenzie’s scheme, to record and retain this power-complex, and not break it down into individual, unrelated, discrete units of cultivating-proprietors. It was important to maintain the relatedness of the collective, as the essential nature of power invested in proprietary-rights seemed to emerge from specific equations of relatedness. As I will show in the next chapter, this representative frame of power-relations eventually established a diverse field of relatedness, going beyond relations of property, as the substance of the “political”. The second representative frame, of a certain vision of “improvement”, however, managed to graft itself on the first, thereby opening up a possibility of extracting the figure of the “cultivating proprietor” from the collective. Mackenzie’s propositions, of having as the engagers of Government revenue, a few of the leading men of the collective, resonated with an aspiration of orienting this collective towards a mode of “improvement” whose leader was the “cultivating-proprietor”. In this framework, therefore, the individual cultivating-proprietor could be projected as a potential agent of improvement only by virtue of his location within the collective of power-relations.

Similar opinions in favor of preserving the collective of village Zemindars were presented by Charles Metcalfe, one of the leading administrators of the time, and

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<sup>45</sup>Mackenzie suggested that, “...in such cases the means of all the proprietors, however small the portion of the village held by them, be recorded in the records of the Canoongoe and of the Collector’s Office...” *Memorandum by the Secretary*, 150. See also, Holt Mackenzie, “Memorandum”, 1.7.1819, para 414, as cited in Husain, *Land Revenue Policy*, 130.

<sup>46</sup>*Memorandum by the Secretary*, 127.

member of the Governor-General's council. Metcalfe's views revolved around the question of the suitability of a ryotwar mode of settlement. The plan of settlement designed for the Ceded and Conquered Provinces closely resembled the ryotwar model. As members of the Board of Revenue noted, that "...the main purposes of Regulation VII of 1822 could be attained only by means of field surveys, so recorded on paper as to show distinctly how every owner or occupant of land in a village was connected, either as receiver or payer of rent, with the fields in which his interest existed..."<sup>47</sup> Metcalfe, however, argued against a ryotwar settlement from a different perspective. He noted that it is absolutely essential to retain the method of surveying and recording, similar to the ryotwar mode. But the engagers of government revenue should be, instead of the individual cultivators, the representatives of the "village community". Here Metcalfe presented an affective appeal for the retention of the "village communities". He proclaimed that, "...I admire the structure of the village communities, and am apprehensive that direct engagements for revenue with each separate landholder or cultivator in a village might tend to destroy its constitution..."<sup>48</sup> Metcalfe, with an emotive charge, spoke about the "village communities" as the ancient, immutable, eternal, resilient social substratum of "India". He claimed that a ryotwar mode of settlement would individualize them, and demolish the fabric of relatedness that acts as their essence. I will be coming back to Metcalfe in the next chapter, as I discuss the centrality of the category of the village in the production of the "political" in British India.

Metcalfe, like Mackenzie, spoke in favour of the ryotwar method of settlement as the most useful technique of preventing a concentration of power in the domain of property. He remarked that the ryotwar mode of recording rights on land, "...would bring to light the owners of every portion of land, and the right of each member of the village community, without rendering it necessary to conclude engagements otherwise than with the village community jointly represented by their headmen..."<sup>49</sup> He believed that it would both allow the headmen to exercise legitimate duties with respect to the collective, yet preclude them from growing into usurpers of power.

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<sup>47</sup>"From the Members of the Western Board to the Governor-General in Council", No. 64, 3 September, 1830, *Selections from Revenue Records, North-West Provinces, 1822-1833*, Allahabad, 1872, No. III, 206-207.

<sup>48</sup>"Minute of Metcalfe", 7 November 1830, *Ibid*, 218.

<sup>49</sup>*Ibid*, 222.

But this was a different vision of the ryotwar, reworked by these deliberations which established the putteedari as the most ancient and original tenure-form of “India”. The ryot, as a co-proprietor of the state, was no longer envisioned as an individual figure. Henceforth, his proprietary identity was viewed in terms of his membership in the collective. He became a ryot-in-the-collective, and his proprietary status was seen as indissociable from this collectivity. Yet at the same time, an individual ryot had to be put forward as a representative figure of this collective. Both Mackenzie and Metcalfe wanted this figure to be the engager of government revenue and the supervisor of the collective.

But there was always an anxiety in official circles over the status of this figure. It was feared that, by assuming the roles of a leader, he might acquire predatory habits, and gradually usurp the rights of his fellow proprietors. In a resolution of the Government, which formed the foundation of the principles of settlement enshrined in Regulation VII of 1822, a dispatch to the Court of Directors was invoked in registering such anxieties. It was noted that since in the forthcoming settlement the Government demand would be fixed as a certain share of the rent, it would immediately create “...a new property before unknown or comparatively of insignificant amount, viz., a considerable surplus profit...after defraying the charges of cultivation, the profits of stock and the Government Revenue.”<sup>50</sup> Thus, the Government pointed out that it becomes fundamentally important to decide which group of landholders should avail the benefit of this rent-property. In an implicit reference to the village Zemindars it was observed that, allowing a single representative individual to enjoy the profit might be harmful “...if particular parties or persons are raised in every Mehal above their present level as compared with their village associates. All may with advantage ascend together in the general scale of society, but the immediate rise of one above his fellows would be felt and would actually operate as a degradation of the rest.”<sup>51</sup> But on the contrary, the Government emphasized, if the “rent” was distributed, among “...all who own and occupy land...” the goals of a permanent settlement will be lost. If the “net produce of the land may be frittered away among a multitude of needy cultivators”, they believed it would, “serve

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<sup>50</sup>1 August 1822, No. 64, *BRC*.

<sup>51</sup>*Ibid.*

only the hurtful purpose of enabling the occupants of the soil to waste an useless superfluity of labor in its tillage...”<sup>52</sup>

In understanding these anxieties it becomes necessary to return to the question of the relation between rent, property and production. It must be remembered here that James Mill’s prescription of extracting the full rent was rooted in an abhorrence of all property arising from rent. Mill believed that any landholder earning rent is bound to turn unproductive. He asserted that, “...in general, the persons who own rent, and live upon rent, consume it all. That is the rule almost universally with them in India, and very generally, I believe, elsewhere...it is accumulation, and that alone, which is the source of capital.”<sup>53</sup> He believed this to be true for everyone—for big landholders like the zemindars, as well as for the peasant-cultivators, or ryots. In Mill’s vision of the ryotwar, therefore, the ryot’s right to occupy and labor was viewed as a “proprietary” one; any privilege beyond this was considered illegitimate. But in the plan of settlement which got implemented in North-Western Provinces, a proprietary-right created by the fixing of rent, was considered as an essential incentive for “improvement”. The previous chapter points this out through the argument of Mackenzie. He believed that it was essential to leave a portion of rent to the cultivating-proprietor to guarantee the security of property, and, consequently, create an urge for “improvement”. As it will be demonstrated later in this chapter, this was also the fundamental premise of John Stuart Mill’s advocacy of peasant proprietors as improvers. All of this, therefore, was lodged in a search for individual figures as “improvers”. But the ryotwaree vision, being refashioned by the putteedari collective, could project individual landholders in a superior form only in terms of their belonging to the collective.

William Bentinck, the Governor-General at that time, was closely involved in all these discussions around issues of settlement. In 1832, Bentinck wrote a minute which further redefined the “political”, leading to the enactment of Regulation IX of 1833, under the guidelines of which the settlement in Cuttack took place. Bentinck, while retaining to a great extent Mackenzie’s interpretation of tenures, created provisions for a significantly different deployment of its tenets. Echoing Mackenzie’s representations, Bentinck noted that the “...Putteedari is the original and natural

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<sup>52</sup>Ibid.

<sup>53</sup>“Evidence by James Mill”, 19 August 1831, 372, *Report from the Select Committee on the Affairs of the East India Company, P.P., 1831*.

tenure of all the lands in the Country...”<sup>54</sup> He also noted, in the line of Mackenzie, that the “...Zemindari or Talukdari tenure is adventitious and artificial, being, generally speaking, a creation of the Moghul Government, and the Talukdar or Zemindar...himself being originally neither more nor less than a contractor with Government for its Revenue.”<sup>55</sup> Yet he also pointed out that even zemindari and talukdari tenures might possess authentic proprietary rights. He argued that those zemindars and talukdars who acquired their tenure, in some way or the other, from the “village community” should be considered authentic proprietors. He noted that such tenures might have been created, “...either from the foundation of the village community having been laid by individual capital or from subsequent acquisition of the proprietary interests of those by whom or by whose ancestors the first occupation was made or from some other competent origin...”<sup>56</sup> In this manner, by creating a scope for these tenures to become legitimately associated to the “village proprietors”, Bentinck enabled the domain of proprietary-rights to expand in its scope, while remaining firmly rooted within that collective, which embodied its authentic form.

Also, by stating that the ryot, as a member of this collective, was endowed with true proprietary-rights, Bentinck repeated the earlier tradition of representing proprietary-rights in “India” as jointly held by the sovereign and the cultivator. For Bentinck, however, the ryot with proprietary rights was only one among the many peasant-cultivators bearing the same title. Bentinck pointed out that, “I am of the opinion that throughout the country there are three descriptions of ryots. The first class I consider as being to all intents and purposes proprietors of the lands which they cultivate, the second as having been originally tenants at will, but acquiring in course of time a prescriptive right of occupancy at fixed rates, and the third as mere contract cultivators.”<sup>57</sup> Further, in describing the first kind, Bentinck, repeating earlier representations of the “ryot-proprietor”, gave the example of the meerasidars of Deccan.<sup>58</sup> As examples of the second and third kind in the context of Deccan, Bentinck spoke of the judeed and pykasht ryots. The meerasidars, however, Bentinck

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<sup>54</sup>William Bentinck, “Minute on Land Tenures”, Enclosure to Circular No. 190, 12 November, 1833, To Commissioners of Revenue (pp 317-51), *Circular Orders of the SBOR at the Presidency of Fort William; Including the Rules of Practice for the Guidance of the Board and of the Commissioners of Revenue, from the year 1788 to the end of August 1837*, Calcutta, 1838, IOR. Also in Revenue, 1832-33, Acc. No. 43B, BDR, OSA.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid.

<sup>58</sup>In the ‘5th Report’ the “ryot-proprietor” was discussed in terms of the same example.

observed, used to possess such proprietary-rights during the ancient Hindu government. But over time, during the period of Muslim rule, their proprietary-profits were entirely extracted by the state as revenue. As a result they were reduced to the status of occupant-cultivators, or the “ryot” of the second kind in Bentinck’s scheme. The three-fold classification of ryots was thus reduced to a two-fold one, using the recurring explanatory trope of the “local”<sup>59</sup>.

The same divisions, Bentinck noted, prevailed in Cuttack as well. There were the occupant cultivators, or the thanee ryots, having their residence and rates of rent fixed, subject to the payment of Government revenue, and there were the migratory cultivators or the pykasht ryots. The thanee ryots, he also noted, were known as the khoodkhast ryots in Bengal. This is how, I will argue, Bentinck’s analysis returned, after a full circle, to Mackenzie’s portrayal of the khoodkhast ryots of Bengal as originally being of the same class as the proprietary-ryots of the “village communities”. In the course of these deliberations, however, Bentinck had expanded the scope of the domain of proprietary-rights, by elaborating on the various figures of the ryots, zemindars, and talukdars, as embodying legitimate, even if distant, legacies of the original collective of village-proprietors. In a certain sense, therefore, Bentinck’s scheme reinterpreted all these figures as ryots, of varying lineages.

Finally, keeping in line with the opinions of Mackenzie, Metcalfe and others regarding the need to maintain the jointness of such tenures, Bentinck resolved that wherever the putteedari tenure was found, engagements for the revenue of government would be made with the headmen, as representatives of the collective. In

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<sup>59</sup>The Meerasidar of ancient times, was seen as carrying in itself capacities of both landlord and farmer. Bentinck referred to a minute of the Madras Board of Revenue, which stated that the “...Meerasidars every where enjoyed a Toondoowarum, or clear landlord’s rent, from all the lands cultivated by their Pyacarry tenants, and both a landlord’s rent and a farmer’s profit from the lands which were cultivated by their own laborers or slaves...” Bentinck, *Minute on Land Tenures*.

Evidently a conglomerate of contemporary political-economic categories, resonating the contemporary political-economic classification of the agrarian relations constitutive of the sphere of “distribution”, was grafted on to the figure of the Meerasidar. In fact, this was also the stated intention of the ‘ryotwari’ system. Munro had argued that in a ryotwari mode of settlement, “...every Ryot will on his own estate be at once, proprietor, farmer, and labourer...” Thomas Munro, “Report of the Collector of the Ceded Districts of 15<sup>th</sup> August 1807, on the advantages and disadvantages of the Zemindary Permanent Settlements and of the Ryotwar Settlements”, *Home Miscellaneous, Papers concerning revenue, administrative and judicial matters in India, 1792-1812*, IOR.

But the figure of the “proprietor-ryot”, as represented in the context of the ryotwari settlement, differed markedly from the one in Bentinck’s scheme. For Bentinck, this “proprietary-ryot”, as an individual peasant cultivator, had been sacrificed at the altar of history. His existence could be discerned only in the putteedari tenure, amidst a collective body of proprietors. Moreover, Bentinck further asserted the authentic proprietary claims of such joint tenures, by saying that even Munro believed that the lands of the south originally belonged to such a tenure. These were the transformations of the “political”, made operative by the deployment of the “local”.



those situations where legitimate talukdars and zemindars existed, Bentinck noted, the rights of all subordinate landholders would be recorded, in order to fix equitably the legitimate distribution of power-relations amongst them. Bentinck's resolutions received an official sanction in the enactment of Regulation IX of 1833. It kept a place for everyone in the "political". The way he reinterpreted the recurrent vision of an ancient, authentic field of proprietary power shared between the state and the ryot-in-the-collective, allowed figures like zemindars and talukdars to regain legitimate positions in it. These figures had been excluded from this field since the failure of the permanent settlement in Bengal. With Bentinck, they re-entered the folds of the "political" with newly-discovered lineages of authenticity. The "local", once again, was instrumental in allowing the classificatory imperative to re-imagine these figures as sharing a distant ancestry with the original proprietary-ryot.<sup>60</sup> In four years time, settlement operations began in Cuttack.

### **"Improvement" and mediation**

In this section, I will examine the modes of identifying and defining a variety of figures on the lands of Cuttack. These operations, as I will demonstrate, need to be understood as the unfolding of an intimacy between Cuttack and the Ceded and Conquered Provinces. As the lands and people of Cuttack got recognized, out of a bundle of administrative practices, yet another field of difference was established. Tenures in Cuttack were found to be different from those in the Ceded and Conquered Provinces. In my opinion, however, this difference remained grounded within the fundamental principles of the same representative frame of reckoning tenures that has been discussed till now. Yet it also had singular ramifications in structuring power-relations on the lands of Cuttack.

Cuttack got entangled in the discourse generated from the North-Western Provinces even before the commencement of its settlement. In 1831, the Board of Revenue on Deputation prepared a list of queries in order to circulate it amongst the

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<sup>60</sup>Bentinck's resolution reminds one of John Stuart Mill's comments on what he believed to be a typically Whiggish attitude. Mill described it as marked by "...a disposition to compromise, to say a little for aristocracy, a little for the people alternatively, and always to give up so much of every important question, as to avoid an irreparable breach, either with one side or with the other." J.S. Mill, *Autobiography*, London, 1873, 293, as cited in Bianca Fontana, "Whigs and Liberals: The Edinburgh Review and the 'liberal movement' in nineteenth-century Britain" in Richard Bellamy (ed.), *Victorian Liberalism: Nineteenth-century political thought and practice*, London, 1990, 50.

settlement officers of the North-Western Provinces.<sup>61</sup> Cuttack, as an unsettled province awaiting settlement, received this list as well. The Board wanted to know, in detail, the various capacities in which the different figures on land were related to each other. The questions on the list clearly revealed that the object of knowledge was only one, namely, the entire matrix of power-relations which formed a “village community”. It is in responding to this questionnaire, that Henry Ricketts, collector of the Balasore district in Cuttack, put forward a detailed documentation of the figures invested with various proprietary-rights in Cuttack.

Ricketts noted that the “agricultural community” in Cuttack primarily consisted of “Zemindars or proprietors paying Revenue direct into the Collector’s treasury...mokuddums...Serberakars...Thanee ryots...Pae Ryots...Tenants at Will...”<sup>62</sup>

In describing the figure of the zemindar, Ricketts argued that since the beginnings of administration in Cuttack, the Sudder Malgoozar, or the engager of the revenue of Government, has been known by this name. The official regulations, over all these years, conferred the proprietary-rights of estates exclusively on such zemindars. These zemindars, he observed, ranged from holders of estates worth revenue of several thousand rupees to holders of a patch of land worth five rupees. It must be kept in mind that the prevailing representations on tenures had, simultaneously, critically reviewed the legitimacy of the zemindar as a bearer of authentic proprietary-rights, and championed the village-Zemindar as the true proprietor. These formulations, expectedly, centrally informed the set of questions that Ricketts was answering. Ricketts, however, argued that in the light of these new perspectives the only difference in the nature of rights to be granted to the zemindars should consist of the introduction of protective measures for the “undertenants” in estates which were big in size. It seemed, going against the prevailing opinion, he was in favour of retaining the proprietary privileges of the Zemindars.

Ricketts use of the term “undertenant” has to be scrutinized, as it had significant implications both for his analytical scheme and for the different articulation of the “political” in Cuttack. Ricketts used this term to denote the

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<sup>61</sup>“Correspondence Regarding Revision of Settlements Under Regulation VII, 1822 from the Board of Revenue on Deputation, to all Commissioners”, No. 628, 24 June, 1831, *Selections from Revenue Records, North-West Provinces, 1822-1833*, Allahabad, 1872, No. VI, IOR.

<sup>62</sup>“To G. Stockwell, Commissioner of Revenue for Cuttack, from H. Ricketts, Collector, Balasore”, 20 October, 1831, “Answer to Questions”, Acc. No. 36B, *BDR, Revenue*, OSA.

mokuddums and serberakars of Cuttack. These were figures which came close to the cultivating proprietors, or village Zemindars of the Ceded and Conquered Provinces. As I have shown earlier, official contentions after the rebellion considered them to be true proprietors of the soil. But such debates on the possibility of these figures being considered as the real proprietors were never settled in Cuttack. In the context of the official admiration of the village Zemindar, Ricketts correctly anticipated that the mokuddums and serberakars might be suddenly endowed with a host of new privileges.

Thus, he observed that “The more direct and immediate connection of the village zemindars with the soil is calculated to induce the supposition of a superior right of ownership there to, and I believe...that alone...has given rise to and supported the belief of their right having been superior to that of those selected as Sudder Malgoozars whose ostensible connection with the soil was more remote...”<sup>63</sup> Ricketts went on describing these landholders as “underholders”, or “undertenants” or even “middlemen”. He emphasized that, “The interests and comfort of all classes of underholders and Ryots may be preserved equal to & indeed beyond what they ever have been, without bestowing on either rights inconsistent with the zemindar ownership. I do not see that the maintenance of the Proprietary right of the Sudder Malgoozars and the protection of the interests of the landholders are by any means incompatible...”<sup>64</sup> He believed that the zemindar, and not the “village Serberakar”, should possess all the benefits of being the proprietor of an estate, primarily those derived from the improvement and extension of cultivation. He firmly asserted that the zemindar as the Sudder Malgoozar should remain the exclusive proprietor of his estate, pointing out that, “Cultivation extends yearly and except under the doctrine that the zemindars are only subordinate collectors, I do not see on what other principle the mokuddums and serberakars are to be permitted to derive exclusive advantage therefrom...”<sup>65</sup>

As I have shown, in Mackenzie’s representations, zemindars and talukdars were considered to be mere collectors of the government revenue. Mackenzie also believed that as “improvers” they were wasteful, and much inferior to the cultivating-proprietors, or “village Zemindars”. Subsequently, Bentinck created a provision

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<sup>63</sup>Ibid.

<sup>64</sup>Ibid.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid.

within his interpretive scheme, of admitting some zemindars and talukdars, who had their origins in the “village community”, as authentic proprietors of the soil. Ricketts seemed to be rejecting both formulations. His unambiguous preference towards the zemindar as the exclusive proprietor of an estate, stemmed clearly from his faith in a vision of “improvement” which had big landlords as its guiding force. It is this political-economic choice that made him re-define those figures which were considered authentic proprietors and productive improvers elsewhere, as wasteful “middlemen” and obstructive “undertenants” in Cuttack. For him, the proprietor, in the manner of a great landlord, had to be the sole improver of his estate. He considered the division of proprietary rights, and profits, among a range of such cultivating proprietors as inimical to the accumulation of capital and “improvement”. Ricketts asked, with great angst, “Is there no danger in any point of view to the interests of Government in recognizing a system the direct tendency of which is to again subdivide property already so subdivided that the owners are paupers?”<sup>66</sup> He further noted that, “The Ryots suffer from such recognition as every increase in the number of *middlemen* must be prejudicial to their interests.”<sup>67</sup>

These statements reflected Ricketts’s predilections towards a model of “improvement”, which aspired for a direct, unmediated relationship between the improving zemindar and the cultivating “ryots”. For Ricketts, the proprietor and the cultivator, had to be separately defined functionaries; the former, a big landlord and a man of capital, the latter, a small peasant and a man of labor. He dismissed that notion of “improvement” which had faith in the cultivating-proprietor’s capacities of becoming a productive improver. This was articulated in the refashioning of the “mokuddums” and “serberakars” as figures incapable of being invested with proprietary-rights or improving functions; it enabled Ricketts to view them as mere managers and wasteful “middlemen”.

Ricketts seemed to be equally convinced of his perspective even before he elaborated upon it in the report on tenures. In settling Mouza Oora in Talook Noanund, previously the property of the Government, he chose as the engager of revenue one among a number of Mokuddums, all of whom claimed a right to engage for a share of the Mouza. These claimants were from the same family. Ricketts chose Permanund Mohapater, the second son of the elder branch of the family, as the

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<sup>66</sup>Ibid.

<sup>67</sup>Ibid.

engager of revenue. He did so, not “from any supposition that his right is superior to that of any of the claimants”, but because “Permanund is the most respectable and quiet of the set and his brother Radakissun notoriously the contrary...”<sup>68</sup> Expressing his fear of subdivision, he noted that, “There are now sixteen persons alive who are entitled to share if the tenure is divisible nine of that number have preferred claims and the rest will doubtless do the same if those preferred are allowed. Supposing these sixteen persons have each three children in the next generation there will be forty eight sharers...”<sup>69</sup> He argued that these “mokuddums” had no other right than of prescriptive occupancy, and since they have not put forward a claim of separation, they “must be treated as undertenants and as such I would oppose the right of dividing the tenure which is held under and consequently ought to be in some measure under the control of the zemindar...”<sup>70</sup>

I argue that even though Ricketts’s treatment of tenures displayed a deviation from the existing formulations, it was equally strongly informed by the two articulations of the “political”. His concern for the protection of the rights of all subordinate landholders emerged out of the existing interpretation of tenures as a field of dispersed and contingent power-relations. He retained this concern, despite his explicit aversion to such “undertenants”. Even in his report on tenures, he emphasized that “...not that I am an advocate for delivering all ryots and undertenants unprotected and disregarded into the unchecked and undefined power of the zemindars far from it, they have not a firmer friend than myself...”<sup>71</sup> But, when it came to the second framing of the “political”, Ricketts differed significantly from the existing perspective on “improvement”. Since he favoured the big landlords over collectives of cultivating proprietors, it became difficult for him at times, to combine the imperatives of both analytical frames. It was difficult for him to protect the rights of “underholders”, yet at the same time consider them obstructions to “improvement”. In settling Baumunpoor, he faced such difficulties. Here, Ricketts approved the restoration of the village Serberakars who had been ousted earlier. He argued that “There might be a finer field for enterprise and the employment of capital on an extensive scale should

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<sup>68</sup>“To G. Stockwell, Commissioner of Revenue for Cuttack, from H. Ricketts, Collector, Balasore”, 17 August, 1829, Acc. No. 28B, June 1829 to December 1830, *BDR, Revenue*, OSA.

<sup>69</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup>“To G. Stockwell, Commissioner of Revenue for Cuttack, from H. Ricketts, Collector, Balasore”, 20 October, 1831, ‘Answer to Questions’, October 1831, Acc. No. 36B, *Balasore District Records, Revenue*, OSA.

all these village proprietors be set aside, but there are also advantages attending their intervention between the zemindars and the actual cultivators.”<sup>72</sup>

But generally, his opposition to these “village-proprietors” was, far more trenchant than his urge to accommodate them as legitimate constituents of the field of power-relations, or potential agents of “improvement”. When fifteen tenures, of parties claiming to be Mokuddums, in Pergunnah Kotdhes, were put on sale for arrears of revenue, Ricketts argued that instead of selling, the rights of these defaulters should be altogether forfeited. He observed that this should be taken as an opportunity to prevent the recreation of such “middlemen”. “...Instead of increasing the hold of these middlemen, it should be our policy rather to aim at their extinction... The zemindar would benefit and through him and also independently of him the state would benefit...altogether extirpated they don’t improve and can’t for they have not the means to improve their villages, and they prevent improvements being made by others.”<sup>73</sup> But Ricketts’s convictions, however forceful they might have been, could not decide the fate of “mokuddums” and “serberakars” in Cuttack. As I will show in the next section, the possibility of considering them as real proprietors, akin to the “village Zemindars” of the Ceded and Conquered Provinces was debated, time and again, at different levels of administration in Cuttack.

### **The new proprietary landscape of Cuttack**

In this section, I will look at administrative practices which invested the “mokuddums” and “serberakars” of Cuttack with different kinds of rights. Arguments over the authentic proprietary status of these figures flew along circuitous pathways of the bureaucratic apparatus. In the course of the settlement of each and every village, these figures rose to prominence in a manner never known before. Exclusive proprietors or not, they surely emerged as lynchpins of the “political” in Cuttack. Even here, the trope of the “local” played a decisive role in determining their futures.

In 1823, the Court of Directors argued in one of their dispatches, that Mr. Kerr, erstwhile commissioner of Cuttack, “found a class of persons who are called Mourousee Moquddums, and whom he recognized as possessing a right to the

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<sup>72</sup>12 January, 1838, No. 36, *SBOR—Settlement Proceedings, 1836-43*, WBSA.

<sup>73</sup>12 December, 1837, No. 82, *SBOR—Miscellaneous Proceedings*, WBSA.

soil...”<sup>74</sup> The prospect of such a claim was immediately scrutinized using the interpretive scheme which defined the “political” of “India”. Once again, the logic of the “local” was triggered to apply the same piece of “empirical” evidence that was deployed in different contexts, from the *5th Report* to Bentinck’s Minute, to explain the supposedly specific situation of Cuttack. The Court noted, that

“The name suggests the idea of a similarity with the class of Meerasidars in some of the more Southern Provinces of India. That the foundation of the rights of these Meerasidars was laid in those of the proprietary class of ryots, known in your Provinces by the name of Khode Khast Ryots seems to be sufficiently ascertained. Where rights and prerogatives beyond those of proprietary ryots are claimed on the part of the Meerasidars they seem in all cases to have been those annexed to the head ryots, the managers of villages, and in many cases, when ages of exaction had destroyed the rights and obliterated the claims of the general class of Khode Khast ryots, the claims of the descendants of these headmen, under the title of Meerasidars, seem to be all that are recognized in existence of the rights of the proprietary ryots.”<sup>75</sup>

This dispatch marked the beginning of a serious consideration of the proprietary prospects of “mokuddums” in Cuttack. As it is evident, the Court found in the “mokuddums” the only legitimate traces of those proprietary-rights which belonged to the “Meerasidars” or “Khoodekhast Ryots” in the ancient times. In this way, while the peasant cultivator’s ancient proprietary status was retained, at the same time it was reinterpreted as belonging in the present to only a select few of those “ryots”, who were perceived as its authentic legatees. Such interpretive strategies of simultaneous inclusion and exclusion of the archetypal cultivating-proprietor, or “ryot”, in the debates over proprietary-rights had significant consequences for the status of an immense variety of cultivators. The “ryot” was fashioned, by the “local” as a transformative presence in the discourse of the “political”. This allowed the “ryot” to be defined as a peasant-cultivator; yet at the same time, not all peasant-cultivators were considered proper “ryots”. Such an alliance between property and

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<sup>74</sup>“Extract of a Despatch from the Honorable the Court of Directors dated the 10<sup>th</sup> December 1823”, Acc. No. 12B, 13<sup>th</sup> August 1821 to 25<sup>th</sup> November 1825, *BDR, Revenue, OSA*.

<sup>75</sup>*Ibid.*

propriety allocated different locations for the peasant cultivators of Cuttack within another matrix of power-relations. This was the “village”, to which I turn in the next chapter.

It is evident that by the 1820s it was resolved at all levels of administration that “village proprietors” were the original propertied body on land in “India”. As I have shown earlier, there was a strong administrative urge to preserve this body wherever it was found in its authentic form. This attitude made itself visible in Cuttack as well. In 1824, an extract from a resolution in the territorial department was sent to the commissioner’s office in Cuttack, which stated unequivocally, that, “it is in no degree the intention of Government suddenly...to break down the communities of Village Proprietors.”<sup>76</sup> But it was also argued, as I have noted with regard to the Court’s dispatch, that in Cuttack the true descendants of these “village proprietors” were the “head ryots” or “managers of villages”. Such “village managers” were named variously, as “mokuddums”, “serberakars” and “pudhans” in Cuttack. It must be kept in mind that in the discussion following the “Paik rebellion”, it was argued that the “pudhan” in the Rajwareh and the “mokuddum” in the Moghulbundee, were merely different names for the same figure, that is, the “village manager”, possessing authentic proprietary-rights in the land. Following the renewed interest in such figures, it was considered absolutely crucial to decide their proprietary status.

“Pudhans” were found mostly in the district of Pooree, located in the southern part of Cuttack. In 1833, the Collector of Pooree offered his opinion to the Commissioner of Cuttack about the “...privileges to be awarded to the recorded zemindars and their subordinate mokuddums or pudhans...”<sup>77</sup> Wilkinson argued that these zemindars had purchased their situations from the mokuddums and pudhans. The latter, according to him, were “...the proprietors of the soil of their respective villages.”<sup>78</sup> In defining the status of these mokuddums and pudhans, who coexisted with zemindars, Wilkinson stated that they cannot be considered the sole proprietors. It must be remembered that Bentinck had argued in his minute that those Zemindars who acquired their proprietary rights legitimately from the “village proprietors”, should be considered bonafide proprietors. In the same vein, regarding the

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<sup>76</sup>“Extract from a Resolution of Government in the Territorial Department”, 21 May 1824, Acc. No. 12B, 13<sup>th</sup> August 1821 to 25<sup>th</sup> November 1825, *BDR, Revenue*, OSA.

<sup>77</sup>“To R. Hunter, Commissioner of Cuttack, from Wilkinson, Collector, Pooree”, 9 July 1833, Acc. No. 28B, June 1829 to December 1830, *BDR, Revenue*, OSA.

<sup>78</sup>*Ibid.*



apportionment of the “malikana”, or the proprietary allowance, Wilkinson insisted that “the Mokuddums who pay through a zemindar cannot be considered the sole proprietors and the zemindars should have some proportion of the Malikana...”<sup>79</sup> In fact, Wilkinson referred to Bentinck’s minute in confirmation of his views. Finally, he suggested that an equal share of both the “malikana” and the expenses of collection should be given to each of these proprietors, where they existed together.

The situation described by Wilkinson existed extensively in Cuttack. There were two kinds of landholders in almost all mahals, or units of settlement. On the one hand, there were persons known as zemindars, who had been treated as the Sudder Malgoozar or the engager of the government revenue in the years before the settlement. On the other, there were persons designated as the “pudhans”, “mokuddums”, or “serberakars” who had been conceived, with varying emphasis, from the time of the rebellion till the present, as bearing traces of the original proprietary body of “village-zemindars”. At the eve of the settlement, however, the critical attitude towards zemindars, characteristic of Mackenzie, Macaulay and others, was counterbalanced by Bentinck, who revalidated their authentic proprietary status. More specifically, in the context of Cuttack, a pro-zemindar stance was reaffirmed in a different way by Ricketts. But despite such reinvigorated positions of support towards zemindars, the landholders in Cuttack considered as proximate to the “village proprietors” could not be marginalized in this complex and conflicting field of administrative practices.

The Sudder Board of Revenue, in response to Wilkinson’s proposal of an equal distribution of the “malikana”, firmly stated that the entire “malikana” and allowances for risks of collection, “...should be assured to the parties under engagements with Government as zemindars and not to any of the subordinate holders...”<sup>80</sup> The Board noted that the “...portion of the proprietary profit which is pure Malikana, is an allowance recognized by the state, as belonging to a proprietor who has the right of engaging with Government...”<sup>81</sup> This is how the Board unambiguously declared their perception of the zemindar as the exclusive proprietor of an estate. The Board further pointed out that the next related matter to be discussed was the particular nature of the interests of the mokuddums who existed in the estates

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<sup>79</sup>Ibid.

<sup>80</sup>“To the Commissioner of Cuttack, from R.D. Mangles, Acting Secretary, Sadar Board of Revenue, Fort William”, 12 November, 1833, Acc. No. 28B, June 1829 to December 1830, *BDR, Revenue*, OSA.

<sup>81</sup>Ibid.

of the zemindars. They remarked that if these mokuddums were found to be different from the village zemindars or “maliks” of the Ceded and Conquered Provinces, “no proposition for dividing and allotting the net profit, need be, for a moment entertained.”<sup>82</sup> Although the Board clearly preferred the zemindar as the actual proprietor, they could not set aside other views. They had to take into account the proprietary prospects of those figures in Cuttack who resembled the village proprietors. Thus, they laid down a number of points which were to be investigated in every single instance of settlement, in order to discern whether the “mokuddums” were “maliks”.

The settlement officers were asked to find out whether the mokuddums have themselves put forward any claim of proprietorship. They were asked to inquire what, if any, kind of proprietary dues the mokuddums received. “Do they receive house rent from artisans? Do they enter upon the lands of a thanee Ryot which have escheated? Do they receive rent from woods, tanks...or enjoy any other of the perquisites denoting the retention of proprietary right?”<sup>83</sup> The Board also wanted the nature of inheritance of these tenures to be examined. They wanted to know what was inherited—an office or real property. These prescriptions defined the manner in which settlement practices in Cuttack articulated the complementary and contradictory interpretive frames of property in land. A rigorous scrutiny of the status of mokuddums was carried out in every estate; their proprietary future depended on success in this performative arena.

But even when they were not considered proprietors, the mokuddums and serberakars of Cuttack were granted significant rights as hereditary managers. Mouza Ruttadeah in Talooka Baumunpoor was claimed as a mokuddumee tenure. The settlement officers granted a prescriptive right of possession to the mokuddum and an allowance of 15 per cent on the expenses of collection. Proprietary rights were, however, denied. A similar course of proceedings was followed in mouza Oortee.<sup>84</sup> In Mouza Gowalsing, the mokuddums tried to prove their proprietary right. They produced deeds of sale showing that they had purchased lands of other villages, and annexed these lands to this village. However, the settlement officer remarked that,

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<sup>82</sup>The Board noted that “The thing to be ascertained, is this, simply whether or not the Mokuddums can prove themselves to be the absolute proprietors of their villages.” “To the Commissioner of Cuttack, from R.D. Mangles, Acting Secretary, SBOR, Fort William, 18 March 1834”, Acc. No. 28B, June 1829 to December 1830, *BDR, Revenue*, OSA.

<sup>83</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>84</sup>12 January, 1838, No. 37, *SBOR—Settlement Proceedings*, WBSA.

“Their witnesses failed to establish the validity of these documents and no proofs denoting them Malikis of the village were adduced.”<sup>85</sup> There were situations as well where the mokuddums and serberakars were granted different kinds of rights. In Talooka Ramchunderpoor, the serberakars were considered mere managers, and granted 10 per cent on the expenses of collection, as opposed to which the mokuddums were recorded as proprietors with a higher allowance of 15 per cent, in recognition of their proprietary right. In a memorandum on this settlement, it was noted that, “...The Mokuddums stand on a different footing, they have a right of property apparently, in the soil; which having been conceded, is of course a saleable property...”<sup>86</sup> But the same memorandum noted that since, in Erdanga and Kespoor, the pudhan could not prove any right, the zemindar was registered as the exclusive proprietor.

In the various villages of Talooka Rughoonathpore the mokuddums were granted proprietary rights either on the basis of original sunnuds where these rights were recorded, or depending on the oral testimonies of old villagers of the mokuddums’ rights to grant rent-free lands. In some instances, existence of these rights was also inferred from the sunnuds of Lakhirajdars, or holders of rent-free lands. The settlement officer noted that in Sandholessur, “The original sunnud was not forthcoming but from a Goomnamah...and from the Sunnuds of Lakhirajdars it appears that the ancestors of the present Mokuddums purchased the mokuddumee from the former zemindar & exercised the usual rights of granting land free of rent.”<sup>87</sup> I had argued in the previous chapter, that these “village assemblies” became, during the settlement, very influential constituents of the power-relations that determined “rent”. It is evident now that they were equally instrumental in defining the status of these village-based landholders.

The settlement in Cuttack, by investing these figures, which resembled the village proprietors, with various kinds of rights, eventually secured a firm position for them in that matrix of power-relations which constituted the “political” in British India. Undoubtedly, a number of distinctions were made between the different kinds of rights granted to these landholders. The malikana was reserved mostly for the

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<sup>85</sup>Old No. 130, Acc. No. 96C, 1836, *CDR, Revenue*, OSA.

<sup>86</sup>“Memorandum by E. Currie”, *SBOR—Settlement Proceedings*, 12 January 1838, No. 38.

<sup>87</sup>“To Henry Ricketts, Assistant Commissioner of Revenue for Cuttack, from James Grant, Collector, Balasore”, 25 December 1835, Old No. 506, Acc. No. 95C, August 1835 to November 1835, *CDR, Revenue*, OSA.

zemindar as the sudder malgoozar, or principal engager of government revenue. But at the same time the mokuddums in his estate were granted an equal amount of allowance, namely 20 per cent on the expenses of collection, as hereditary managers with a prescriptive right of possession vested in the office. Malikana was granted to mokuddums in those cases, albeit very few in number, where they existed as the party under engagement. Wherever these mokuddums were identified as “mowroosee”, they were considered as real proprietors. As I have shown, such identification was made mostly through the sunnuds of holders of rent-free lands. It was noted, in the final settlement papers, that “The Mowroosee, or old hereditary Mokuddums, were doubtless the ‘rightful proprietors of the soil’, and their tenures are of a heritable and transferable nature.”<sup>88</sup> The pudhans, found mostly in southern Cuttack, were treated in a light similar to mowroosee mokuddums. Their tenures were considered hereditary and transferable in nature, and they were also allowed malikana, being the exclusive engager of government revenue. The serberakars, however, were considered only as hereditary managers. These tenures were perceived to be hereditary offices of management, and granted an allowance of either 15 or 20 per cent on the jumma, as expenses of collection.

It emerges clearly from this differentiation of rights, that these landholders were decisively entrenched as mainstays in the economy of agrarian relations in Cuttack. The zemindar, despite being recorded as the Sudder Malgoozar in most cases, had his authority fractured and distributed among these other landholders. The zemindar had always been the pivotal figure in the networks of power on land. But these serberakars, mokuddums, and pudhans, for the first time, riding on the wave of an overwhelming administrative admiration for village proprietors, wrenched an official sanction of their authority. In Cuttack, like everywhere else, the uncontested supremacy that the zemindars used to enjoy was eclipsed. There were new players in the field of power.

### **Richard Jones, the “political”, and British India**

It is time to return to political economy in contemporary Britain. In this chapter I demonstrated how an ensemble of proprietary relations and political power got

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<sup>88</sup>“Papers on The Settlement of Cuttack and On The State Of The Tributary Mehals”, *Selections from The Records of The Bengal Government*, No. III, 19, Calcutta, 1851.

constituted as the object of agrarian governance. In the previous chapter I argued that rent was perceived to be a key marker of this domain of power. Rent emerged as the leading conceptual category over which a number of methodological debates took place, leading to a reorientation of the epistemological underpinnings of contemporary political economy. These changes established the “political” as the object of knowledge in political economy. Now, in exploring the “political”, I will try to read political economy in the light of the logic of British Indian agrarian governance.

In Richard Jones’s scheme, the interrelation between the political-economic categories of rent, wage, and profit, comprising the sphere of distribution, was an effect of the “political”. In other words, Jones argued that an ensemble of property and political power determined how the different portions of the whole produce, as rent, wage, and profit, will be distributed to different groups of society. This distribution, he argued, took place differently in different nations, depending upon the specific form of the “political” prevailing in them. As I argued earlier, for Jones, distribution and production were integrally related domains in political-economy. Thus, the specific mode of distribution also shaped the specific potential of production. In this manner, Jones established an analytical primacy of the “political”. The “political”, in his scheme, was the primary determinant of the productive potential of nations.

In the greater part of the world, Jones noted, a vast majority of the population labored on the land to secure the means of subsistence. He argued that a lack of employment and capital in non-agricultural occupations kept them “...confined to the cultivation of the earth by an insuperable necessity, by adamantine chains, which cannot be broken by any human power.”<sup>89</sup> In these conditions, rents and wages determined each other. Jones pointed out that, “...of the produce of the soil, a part is left in the hands of the occupier—it constituted his wages; a part goes to the owner of the soil—it constitutes his rent...”<sup>90</sup> All of this, he argued, was linked to the fundamental absence of capital in these nations. Jones defined capital as “‘accumulated wealth employed with a view to profit,’ and only such wealth.”<sup>91</sup> It was that division of wealth which brought out the greatest productive capacities of

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<sup>89</sup>Rev. William Whewell (ed.), *Literary Remains, consisting of Lectures and Tracts on Political Economy of the late Rev. Richard Jones*, London, 1859, 426.

<sup>90</sup>*Ibid*, 428.

<sup>91</sup>*Ibid*, 556.

nations by organizing production in a specific manner. It acted as the fund from which labourers received their wages. It created those conditions of labouring where labor could be most continuous, skilful, and powerful. To summarize, capital created the best conditions for the production of wealth, by enabling the highest productive efficiency of labor.<sup>92</sup>

Jones argued that the absence of capital, and consequently, of the most advanced form of labouring, in the greater part of the world were effects of the conditions under which production and distribution were organized there. He traced these conditions to the specific configurations of proprietary relations and political power. He noted that, “when the lands of a country are appropriated, and the agriculturalists are dependent on the possession of portions of them for subsistence, political systems are generated, which inevitably secure the political and social subordination—we might almost say servitude—of the peasantry.”<sup>93</sup> Jones proceeded to explain differences in the forms of the “political”, by reconstructing the historical roots of such entanglements between proprietary relations and political power in the careers of nations.

He noted that property in land can be divided into “European” and “Asiatic” forms. In the “European” nations land belonged to individuals as private property, while in the “Asiatic” ones, it was the property of the sovereign. Jones emphasized that this difference emerged from the different constitutions of power that characterized the ruling groups of these nations. In “Asiatic” nations, the power of the state was absolute which made the sovereign the paramount owner of all lands in his dominion. Jones attributed this form of power to the political constitution of the earliest invaders of these nations. He exclaimed that, “Wherever these Scythian invaders have settled, they have established a despotic form of government, to which they have readily submitted themselves, while they were obliging the inhabitants of

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<sup>92</sup>“The objects of Political Economy are...Laws determining the production of wealth; and...Laws determining the distribution of wealth...There are three causes which determine the productive power of the industry of nations: 1.The continuity with which it is exerted. 2. The skill with which it is directed. 3. The power by which it is aided. Of course, the primary sources of all material wealth are the earth and the elements. Human labour gives to wealth the various shapes in which it appears; in other words, it elicits and fashions it. Hence it follows that the production of wealth depends upon the productiveness or efficiency of labor.” Ibid, 189.

<sup>93</sup>Ibid, 456.

the conquered countries to submit to it.”<sup>94</sup> Contrary to this, Jones argued, the Germanic tribes established a free constitution in the “European” nations conquered by them. The difference between the political constitutions of the earliest invaders, which gave birth to different political systems in the two kinds of nations, had their roots in the essentially pastoral habitat of one of these invaders. “It may be found perhaps, in a great measure, in the different character of their original seats. Amidst the fastnesses and morasses of his native woods, the German, when not actually at war, was in tolerable security; his habits of military obedience, we know, relaxed...”<sup>95</sup> In comparison to this, the Tartars and the Afghans, who introduced a “despotic” constitution in the “Asiatic” nations, never settled peacefully in the lands they occupied. Jones proclaimed that, “The task of guarding their property and lives, is a constant campaign; and their habits of military submission have no intervals of relaxation; they are born and they die in them.”<sup>96</sup> Thus, he noted, “...it is certain that the Tartars have every where either adopted or established a political system, which unites so readily with their national habits of submission in the people, and absolute power in the chiefs...Throughout agricultural Asia...the same system prevails.”<sup>97</sup>

As it is evident, Richard Jones established the “political” as the epistemological object of political economy. I have demonstrated in this chapter that the same complex of proprietary relations and political power was fashioned as the object of agrarian governance in British India. Jones’s analysis, however, did not end here. Once the truth of such distant pasts was established, Jones moved on to more recent pasts in order to represent the “political” in India as a variegated and complex field of relations of power between proprietors of several kinds. Through these historical excursions, Jones demonstrated how the despotism of power in “India” always remained incomplete. He pointed out that the state could never act as the absolute landlord. Instead, property in land was distributed amongst a number of landholders and landholding bodies of various size and status, who acquired their respective positions over time. Together, they constituted a complex calculus of power-relations, which was time and again threatened by foreign conquests, and the despotic possibilities of the power of the state.

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<sup>94</sup>Richard Jones, *An Essay on the Distribution of Wealth and on the Sources of Taxation*, London, 1831, 110.

<sup>95</sup>Ibid.

<sup>96</sup>Ibid, 112.

<sup>97</sup>Ibid, 112-113.

For Jones, this collective comprised of the state, the officers of state, like the zemindars, the potails as representatives of a collective body of proprietary power, namely the “village”, and the ryots. Jones considered this entire power-matrix as the specific “political” of India. He noted that the ryots possessed attributes of both tenant and proprietor. Their right of possessing land was hereditary and to a great extent, permanent. Jones pointed out that the ryot was never a proprietor, in the sense of enjoying a landlord’s rent from his land, or having alienable rights in the soil. In fact, while deliberating on the question of the proprietary status of ryots, he referred to the writings of reputed administrators of British India, like Thomas Munro and Col. Todd. He noted that, “...Sir Thomas Munro declares the ryot to be the true proprietor.”<sup>98</sup> But he disagreed with Munro in arguing that the only right which the ryot had was of hereditary possession; he received it as “a grant from the sovereign on certain conditions; resumable at pleasure, although practically rarely resumed...”<sup>99</sup> Similarly, Jones observed, the offices of zemindars and potails also became hereditary over time. Just like the British Indian administration, Jones construed various kinds of rights, either of possessing land or of possessing offices connected with land, as proprietary ones.

It is the same understanding of the “political” which informed a section of his lectures on political economy at Haileybury. In this section, entitled “The Anglo-Indian Revenue Systems”, Jones marked the failure of the British Indian administration in understanding the “political” in India. He began with the blunders of the permanent settlement. Pointing out that the policy was “grounded upon delusions,” he argued that “great ignorance prevailed at that time...with regard to the manifold and diversified rights connected with the soil...”<sup>100</sup> The effect of the policy was pernicious, as it converted the revenue-farmers into absolute landlords, rejecting the entire gamut of proprietary rights that co-existed with them. However, Jones remarked, there was an attempt to correct the errors of the permanent settlement in Madras. Jones noted, echoing the way the “local” was mobilized to explain the “political” of “India” by administrators, that “to the southern parts of India the Mohammedans had not penetrated; and there Hindu institutions remained in their

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<sup>98</sup>Appendix No. VIII, “Note on Ryot Rents”, Jones, *An Essay on the Distribution of Wealth*, 40.

<sup>99</sup>Ibid, 41.

<sup>100</sup>Whewell (ed.), *Literary Remains*, 283.



completeness and vigour.”<sup>101</sup> Here, based on the vision of an erstwhile relation of co-proprietorship between the ryot and the state, a new settlement was implemented. As Jones saw it, the “political” in India was still being misconstrued. Thus, he argued that the ryotwari system was “...founded upon a principle just the reverse of that which was the basis of the zemindary system, but was equally false and equally fatal. The one disregarded the rights of the ryot, its framers having been deluded by a name into confounding together an infinite diversity of proprietary claims and interests; while the other swept away, suddenly and violently, a multitude of relations, linking the highest with the lowest.”<sup>102</sup>

Such was Richard Jones’s framing of the “political”. He kept on insisting that it is a diversity of proprietary relations, and not the superiority of one to the exclusion of others which defined the “political” in India. The British Indian administration, time and again, falsely upheld one at the expense of others. The misperceptions continued, Jones argued, as another system of settlement was introduced. This was based on an imagination of the ancient village as the authentic seat of proprietary-rights in India. But in an attempt to recreate such a putatively ancient unit of property and government, namely, the village, a new exclusive centre of power was created.<sup>103</sup>

Richard Jones perceived the “political” of India as a distributed field of power-relations flowing out of a variety of proprietary capacities. As it has been argued in this chapter, such a vision of the “political” also informed the constitution of the object of agrarian governance in British India. But political economy in contemporary Britain underwent other epistemological transformations as well. Even here, the reorientations were effected around the category of property. The problematic of property was, however, formulated differently from Richard Jones in this strand of political-economy. In the next section, with John Stuart Mill, I explore these new directions.

### **Linking property and production: the “political” in John Stuart Mill**

The category of property played a pivotal role in fashioning John Stuart Mill’s political-economy. As it is well known, the greatest public trial that Mill’s political-

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<sup>101</sup>Ibid, 286-7.

<sup>102</sup>Ibid, 287.

<sup>103</sup>Ibid, 289-90.

economic principles faced was over the burning question of the conditions of Ireland. While the discontentment emerging from Britain's political domination of Ireland during Mill's time revolved around a host of issues, grievances over land-ownership, unarguably, was one of the most important among them. It is in this sphere that John Stuart Mill, as one of the leading public intellectuals of his day, proposed major reforms in the existing state of property in land. Mill's location in this campaign has been critically scrutinized by a number of works.<sup>104</sup> Other works have pointed out that the prescriptions Mill proposed for Ireland, were also directed by him towards British India.<sup>105</sup> Recently, it has also been argued that the experience Mill gained of British India as an employee at the India House, the change in his own intellectual orientation from a strong Utilitarian position in early life to a revised one inspired by his readings of romantic and conservative European thinkers, and his engagement with Ireland's socio-economic conditions, all influenced each other in shaping his positions on contemporary issues.<sup>106</sup> In this section, I argue that in order to understand Mill's prescriptions for Ireland and British India, it is necessary to examine the epistemological core of his political economy, which was marked by a distinct analytical linkage between production and property in land. Such an analytical primacy of the category of property, I contend, made Mill's political economy both distinctive, yet at the same time, part of a critical tradition of this branch of knowledge. Like Richard Jones, Mill also forged connections between property in land and political power in designing his political economy. But these connections differed crucially from Jones's reckoning of the "political".

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<sup>104</sup>E. D. Steele argues that Mill's campaign for the reform of landed property was shaped by a great degree of pragmatism. The radicalism implicit in his theorization of landed property in his treatise on political economy was continuously tempered in his other political writings, as he did not want to take on the wrath of the English aristocracy. Thus, in later editions of the "Principles of Political-Economy", the radical conclusions were abandoned. See E. D. Steele, "J.S. Mill and the Irish Question: The Principles of Political Economy, 1848-1865", *The Historical Journal*, 13, 2, June 1970, 216-36. In a subsequent piece Steele argues that Mill's radicalism was actually a vindication of English nationalism and imperialism. See E.D. Steele, "J.S. Mill and the Irish Question: Reform, and the integrity of the empire, 1865-70", *The Historical Journal*, 13, 3, 1970, 419-450. Bruce Kinzer critiques Steele by arguing that "with advancing years and altered circumstances, Mill came gradually to moderate his hostility towards the aristocracy, but he never relinquished his view of the retrogressive character of landlord influence in English politics...an antipathy to landlordism combined with a genuine sympathy for the Irish peasantry to lead Mill to consider the condition of Ireland." (pp 111-12) Kinzer insists that Mill's campaign was infused with a radical moral consciousness. See Bruce L. Kinzer, "J.S. Mill and Irish Land: A Reassessment", *The Historical Journal*, 27, 1, 1984, 111-27.

<sup>105</sup>See Abram L. Harris, "John Stuart Mill: Servant of the East India Company", *The Canadian Journal of Economic and Political Science*, 30, 2, May 1964, 185-202, and R.D. Collison Black, "Economic Policy in Ireland and India in the Time of J.S. Mill", *The Economic History Review*, n.s., 21, 2, August 1968, 321-336.

<sup>106</sup>See Lynn Zastoupil, *John Stuart Mill and India*, Stanford, 1994.

In J.S. Mill's "Principles of political-economy", a large section was devoted to "property", which was a completely new addition to the conventional curriculum of such treatises on political economy. The new entry was not a mere, minor additive to the established tenets of this body of knowledge. Rather, in a manner much similar to Jones, Mill explained "property" as that set of conditions which decisively determined both production and distribution all over the world. He noted that "property" was the primary institution regulating the "...different modes of distributing the produce of land and labour."<sup>107</sup> Since property was intimately involved with production and distribution, Mill believed it was essential to explore what it consisted of. He argued that "Private property, in every defence made of it, is supposed to mean, the guarantee to individuals of the fruits of their own labor and abstinence."<sup>108</sup> He emphasized that property essentially consisted of "the right of producers to what they have themselves produced."<sup>109</sup> I argue that this integral association between property and production was foundational to Mill's perspective on the state of property in land during his time. It is primarily on the basis of this connection that Mill established distinct conceptual linkages between property in land, production, distribution, and political power in his political-economy.

Property, as Mill saw it, consisted of the right of the producer to the product. There was, however, a problem in applying this definition to landed property. Land could not be owned on the basis of this principle, as it was not produced by anybody. But at the same time, land could be made productive only by the application of labor to it. Most importantly, it was the natural source of mankind's fundamental means of subsistence. By relating land to his conceptualization of property and production in this manner Mill was able to argue that there are both individual and collective stakes immanent in the category of landed-property. Landed property was different from the category of property in general. Mill noted that, "when the 'sacredness of property' is talked of, it should always be remembered, that any such sacredness does not belong in the same degree to landed property. No man made the land. It is the original

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<sup>107</sup> John Stuart Mill, *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill, Volume II—The Principles of Political Economy with Some of Their Applications to Social Philosophy (Books I-II)* [1848] ed. John M. Robson, Toronto, 1965, 207.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid, 212.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid, 218.

inheritance of the whole species. Its appropriation is wholly a question of general expediency.”<sup>110</sup>

Since it was the essential source of human sustenance and a gift of nature, land was immanently collective. In that case, Mill argued, the only form of individual ownership that can be legitimately instituted in land must be of a productive capacity. In other words, individual ownership of land was “...only valid, in so far as the proprietor of land is its improver. Whenever, in any country, the proprietor, generally speaking, ceases to be the improver, political economy has nothing to say in defence of landed property...In no sound theory of private property was it ever contemplated that the proprietor of land should be merely a sinecurist quartered on it.”<sup>111</sup> This was the basis of Mill’s advocacy for peasant-proprietorship in Ireland, or in British India. Mill thought that it was an absence of this constitutive connection between property and production that characterized land-ownership all over the world. This absence was particularly visible in Britain where big landlords existed as unproductive owners of lands.<sup>112</sup>

It was this distinctive categorization of land based on the vital association between property and production that turned Mill’s political economy into a discourse of the “political”. I argue that the collectivist claim immanent in Mill’s categorization of land transformed the epistemological underpinnings of his political economy. The objects of analysis, and prescription, of his political-economy became the “political”, which resulted in a connection between production, property and political power. He argued that the institution of private property in modern Europe was “...the result, not of just partition, or acquisition by industry, but of conquest and violence...The laws of property have never yet conformed to the principles on which the justification of private property rests...”<sup>113</sup> Accordingly, Mill believed that the mode in which property in land existed in Europe, and especially, in Britain, was completely inimical to the principles of political economy. Thus, when he advocated the creation of peasant-properties in Ireland by legalizing customary rates of rent, he thought he was working within political-economic postulates. He believed that state-intervention in the domain of private property in land was justified due to the peculiar political-

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<sup>110</sup>Ibid, 227.

<sup>111</sup>Ibid, 226.

<sup>112</sup>He pointed out that “landed property in England is thus very far from completely fulfilling the conditions which render its existence economically justifiable. But if insufficiently realized even in England, in Ireland those conditions are not complied with at all...” Ibid, 227.

<sup>113</sup>Ibid, 212.

economic characteristic of landed-property, which harboured the “political” in it. The state here stood for the general will of the community. Mill declared that “the community has too much at stake in the proper cultivation of the land, and in the conditions annexed to the occupancy of it, to leave these things to the discretion of a class of persons called landlords, when they have shown themselves unfit for the trust.”<sup>114</sup> He clearly pointed out that an exclusive ownership to land could be granted only if the proprietor was also an improver. That is because, in this capacity, by responsibly executing the act of production, he would be fulfilling his duties towards the community’s source of sustenance.<sup>115</sup>

Mill was, I argue, reworking the Malthusian proposition in conceptualizing the link between landed property, production and political power. To be precise, he effected a secularization of the Malthusian perception of land as a divine monopoly. Malthus did not see a problem in viewing landlords as the legitimate exclusive owners of land, because he considered them as natural trustees of this divine monopoly. But for Mill, since land, as the source of the fundamental means of life, was a monopoly, it was naturally connected to the rights of a community. Thus, it could only be appropriated if it served the purposes of the community. In other words, it could only be owned if it was cultivated by the owner. The state, therefore, as a representative of the community, had the right to determine the nature of its ownership. Thus, he pronounced, that, “it is an acknowledged principle that when the State permits a monopoly, either natural or artificial, it retains the right, and cannot divest itself of the duty, to place the exercise of the monopoly under any degree of control which is requisite for the public good.”<sup>116</sup>

Moreover, by making the “political” the constitutive element of political-economy in this case, Mill argued that the state had always been the legitimate owner of land, and, therefore, could always ensure that the real cultivators of land possess proprietary rights in some form. He gave a few examples to prove his point: “In Russia, even when the cultivators of the soil were serfs out of the landed proprietor, his proprietary right in the land was limited by rights of theirs belonging to them as a

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<sup>114</sup>Ibid, 228.

<sup>115</sup>Mill noted that “...in the case of land, no exclusive right should be permitted in any individual, which cannot be shown to be productive of positive good...When land is not intended to be cultivated, no good reason can in general be given for its being private property at all; and if any one is permitted to call it his, he ought to know that he holds it by sufferance of the community...” Ibid.

<sup>116</sup>John Stuart Mill, “Leslie on the Land Question”, (1870), J.M. Robson (ed.) *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill, Volume V-Essays on Economy and Society Part II*, Toronto, 1967, 218.

collective body managing its own affairs, and with which he could not interfere...In other cases, as in Tuscany, the *metayer* farmer is virtually co-proprietor with the landlord, since custom, though not law, guarantees to him a permanent possession and half the gross produce, so long as he fulfils the customary conditions of his tenure....”<sup>117</sup> Mill further emphasized that although in Britain the landlords were considered exclusive proprietors of land “...the theory of the law does not acknowledge an absolute right of property in land in any individual; the fullest landed proprietor known to the law, the freeholder, is but a ‘tenant’ of the Crown.”<sup>118</sup>

It is evident that like his father, Mill was also trying to argue that the form of landed-property prevalent in Britain was contrary to both the facts of the world and the correct principles of political-economy. In Britain, and in Ireland, such a connection between property and production was long lost. Mill argued that the landlords of Britain rarely acted as responsible managers of the community’s asset; they were not productive proprietors of land. Mill’s critique of big landlords, emerging from the alliance of property and production, was combined with an influential contemporary strand of opinion in the field of the political economy of agriculture to produce his advocacy for peasant-proprietorship in Ireland. Thus, he confidently declared that, “...though the self-interest of landlords frequently operates to frustrate, instead of promoting, the interest which the community has in the most effective use of the productive powers of the soil, there is another party concerned whose self-interest does work in that useful direction; and that is, the actual cultivator of the soil, if he be either a small proprietor, or a tenant on conditions which secure to him the full fruits of his labor and outlay...”<sup>119</sup> This was the basis of Mill’s campaign for granting security of tenure, and, thereby, legalizing peasant-properties in Ireland. As it is well known, he had similar prescriptions for reforming the state of landed-

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<sup>117</sup>“Chapters on Socialism”, 1879, Ibid, 282.

<sup>118</sup>Ibid, 282.

<sup>119</sup>Clive Dewey argues that it was William Thornton’s defence of peasant-properties, prepared on the basis of a massive pool of evidence collected from several European countries, that enabled Mill to argue that this form of property leads to the greatest productivity in land. See Clive J. Dewey, “The rehabilitation of the peasant proprietor in nineteenth-century economic thought”, *History of Political Economy* 6, 17-47. Mill indeed used Thornton’s evidence in the “Principles of Political Economy” to argue his case. David Martin’s essay, however, provides a useful corrective to Dewey’s point. Martin notes that Mill was equally influenced by numerous European authors, like Tocqueville and the Prussian historian Frederick Von Raumer, to name a few, in forming an opinion in favour of small properties. See David Martin, “The rehabilitation of the peasant proprietor in nineteenth-century economic thought: a comment”, *History of Political Economy*, 8, 2, 1976, 297-302.

property in Britain.<sup>120</sup> He believed that the “The *principle* of private property has never yet had a fair trial in any country; and less so, perhaps, in this country than in some others.”<sup>121</sup>

From this perspective when Mill analyzed the state of landed property in India, the category of custom emerged as a vital ingredient of the “political”. Like Richard Jones, Mill also viewed the form of landed property in India as a dispersed field of power. He perceived property in India as various kinds of rights attached with land, distributed over a range of landholders and landholding bodies. These rights were of revenue collection, management and cultivation. They were possessed, in different capacities, by the state, its hereditary officers collecting revenue, the village community, and the cultivators. Thus, in India, as Mill saw it, the state, despite being the universal landlord, had its proprietary privileges limited by a highly differentiated field of rights. But in this power-matrix, Mill argued, custom was the only principle of determining the proprietary rights of the actual cultivators. Custom fixed the rent, thereby, determining how much of the profits of cultivation would remain with the cultivators. In certain circumstances, where landownership was implicated in the collective body of the village, custom organized production by ascertaining the share of the produce, or the land itself, to be enjoyed by the individual cultivators.<sup>122</sup>

For Mill, custom completed the constitutive linkage between property, production and political power. Mill argued that, “custom is the most powerful protector of the weak against the strong; their sole protector where there are no laws

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<sup>120</sup> As Zastoupil notes: “In the last years of his life, Mill actively promoted the idea of curbing the power of the British aristocracy by limiting its control over land... Besides allowing large estates to be broken up and sold to industrious farmers, Mill and the Land Tenure Reform Association proposed taxing unearned increases in rent from land... Furthermore, aid was to be made available to small cultivators to help them acquire land...” Zastoupil, *John Stuart Mill and India*, 186.

<sup>121</sup> John Stuart Mill, *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill, Volume II—The Principles of Political Economy with Some of Their Applications to Social Philosophy (Books I-II)* [1848] ed. John M. Robson, Toronto, 1965, 209.

<sup>122</sup> “The government was part owner, having the right to a heavy rent... The government might make over its share to an individual, who then became possessed of the right of collection and all the other rights of the state, but not those of any private person connected with the soil. These private rights were of various kinds. The actual cultivators, or such of them as had been long settled on the land, had a right to retain possession; it was held unlawful to evict them while they paid the rent—a rent not in general fixed by agreement, but by the custom of the neighbourhood. Between the actual cultivators and the state... there were intermediate persons with rights of various extent. There were officers of government who... were often hereditary officers. There were also, in many cases, village communities, consisting of the reputed descendants of the first settlers of a village, who shared among themselves either the land or its produce according to rules established by custom, either cultivating it themselves or employing others to cultivate it for them...” John Stuart Mill, “Chapters on Socialism”, 1879, J.M. Robson (ed.) *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill, Volume V—Essays on Economy and Society Part II*, Toronto, 1967, 281.

or government adequate to the purpose.”<sup>123</sup> In India, therefore, it served to protect the cultivator’s proprietary right from the despotic power of the state, and the predatory propensities of its officers. Custom had a political-economic function. It ensured that the cultivator had some proprietary right in land, thereby, guaranteeing a productive utilization of the community’s treasure.<sup>124</sup> Mill observed that property and production could be brought together only if the ryots, or cultivators, were converted to cultivating-proprietors. In British India, he argued, such a possibility was inherent in the proprietary conditions on land.<sup>125</sup> But during the early period of their rule, the British failed to realize this possibility, and mistakenly made the wasteful zemindars the proprietors of the land. The mistake was, however, rectified over time.<sup>126</sup> Interestingly, Cuttack found exclusive mention in Mill’s interpretation of the history of settlement-practices in British India as a progressive movement towards the best form of connection between property and production. Mill noted that, “the revenue system of Cuttack is ryotwar; but the attempt has latterly been made to combine the advantages of the ryotwar principle, with a portion of those of the system of the North-west Provinces...This mixed system of ryotwar and village management, having been successful in Cuttack, is in course of introduction into one of our latest acquisitions, the districts made over to our permanent administration by the

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<sup>123</sup> Mill, *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill, Volume II*, 233.

<sup>124</sup> Mill’s use of the category of custom was certainly rooted to an evolutionist hierarchy. He believed that while competition was a mark of modern societies, custom dominated the traditional ones. But more importantly, within the societies he considered as traditional, he envisioned custom as a political-economic category. In a certain sense, therefore, his use of custom contained in it a critique of the traditional-modern hierarchy. Mill’s reasoning implied that due to the force of custom, property and production was organized in traditional societies like India in a manner which conformed to the principles of political-economy; whereas in modern ones, like Britain, such a condition was glaringly absent.

<sup>125</sup> In elucidating this perspective, Mill quoted extensively from the writings of a historian of India. “‘There was an opportunity in India,’ continues the historian, ‘to which the history of the world presents not a parallel. Next after the sovereign the immediate cultivators had, by far, the greatest portion of interest in the soil...The motives to improvement which property gives, and of which the power was so justly appreciated, might have been bestowed upon those upon whom they would have operated with a force incomparably greater than that with which they could operate upon any other class of men: they might have been bestowed upon those from whom alone, in every country, the principal improvements in agriculture must be derived, the immediate cultivators of the soil...But the legislators were English aristocrats; and aristocratical prejudices prevailed.’” Mill, *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill, Volume II*, 284.

<sup>126</sup> Mill noted that, “In the parts of India into which the British rule has been more recently introduced, the blunder has been avoided of endowing a useless body of great landlords with gifts from the public revenue. In most parts of the Madras and in part of the Bombay Presidency, the rent is paid directly to the government by the immediate cultivator. In the North-Western Provinces, the government makes its engagement with the village community collectively, determining the share to be paid by each individual, but holding them jointly responsible for each other’s default.” Ibid, 285.



Nizam...”<sup>127</sup> Mill thought Cuttack exemplified the best form of settlement, where the advantages of both ryotwar and mouzawar were combined. Thus, in his scheme of things, Cuttack emerged as the most advanced, and therefore, model form of settlement, to be replicated in the latest territorial acquisitions of the government.

Mill chose to explain the settlement practices of these parts of British India in the light of his own argument about landed-property, at the centre of which was the figure of the peasant-proprietor. While largely adopting the Jonesian complex of property and political power, he reconfigured it in terms of the imperatives of production. But the new administrative arrangements in British India, to which Mill referred, were adopted years before Mill’s publication, mostly in the 1820s and 1830s. They neither anticipated, nor simply reflected this emerging consensus around the figure of the peasant-proprietor in contemporary political economy. There was certainly a favourable attitude towards the cultivating-proprietor, discernible in various moments, over different geographical sites in British India. It congealed into a particular form in the context of Mackenzie’s representations and the debates of the Ceded and Conquered Provinces. In Cuttack, once again, it assumed a different character.

But the organization of agrarian relations in a particular locality, in this case Cuttack, was not a simple development of this appreciation of the peasant-proprietor. As this chapter shows, it was a complex outcome, the contours of which were decisively determined by the trope of the “local”. Within the framework of the “local”, there was a productive tension between the two articulations of the “political”—one that wanted to keep power-relations distributed, and the other that tried to resuscitate the original proprietary figure, the cultivating peasant-proprietor. Even then, it was not a simple addition of these two imperatives that produced the designs of agrarian power in localities. While there was an undoubtedly an epistemological kinship between the “political” in political economy and the “local” in British Indian agrarian governance, none of them were copies of the other. Neither did they influence, anticipate, or reflect each other. Yet they were woven together by strong lines of force, and circuitous pathways of connection. This dissertation argues

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<sup>127</sup> John Stuart Mill, “Memorandum of the Improvements In the Administration of India During the Last Thirty Years”, 1858, John Robson, Martin Moir, and Zawahir Moir (ed.) *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill, Volume XXX-Writings on India*, Toronto, 1990, 127-28.

that their visibility emerges only when they are considered as an apparatus, as a single, unified analytical field.

## Conclusion

This chapter has tried to put forward an anti-foundational method of analyzing agrarian power in a locality. Cuttack, I argue, remains important to this chapter, and more generally to the dissertation, but only as different crystallized moments of a much broader geographical and analytical space. The rebellion of the paiks, Stirling's exposition of tenures, Ricketts's arguments about "wasteful intermediaries", and the new-found rights of mokuddums, serberakars, and pudhans after the settlement undoubtedly shed important light on the specificities of the agrarian society of Cuttack. But their meanings were neither restricted to, nor produced from within singular, irreducible conditions of Cuttack. Rather, they become meaningful only when they are seen as produced by an integrated historical field, of which the North-Western Provinces, the British Parliament, the Bengal government, and texts of political economy were equally important constituents. This chapter, therefore, performs the task of locating localities by unravelling the logic of the "local", through its relationships with the "political".

I have argued here that these processes established the "local" as the object of agrarian governance in British India over the first half of the nineteenth century. But this chapter might have hinted that the "local" did not only consist of relationships between individual landholding figures like zamindars, talukdars, serberakars, mokuddums, and ryots. In the critique of the permanent settlement of Bengal, these figures were newly discovered not as discrete individuals, but as variously related members of a landholding body, namely, the village. As this chapter has shown, their pedigrees as authentic proprietors were graded on the basis of their links to the "village community". Even zemindars and talukdars, who were considered by the 5<sup>th</sup> *Report* as corrupt outcrops of the recent past and far removed from the authentic proprietor-ryot, were eventually granted some position in this hierarchy by Bentinck, only if they were found to have roots in the collective of village-proprietors. What emerges from these contentions is the centrality of the village, as a landholding body. The next chapter will examine the particular manner in which the village emerged as

the foundation of the “political”, the seat of the “local”, and the fundamental object of agrarian governance in British India.

## Chapter Five

### Grounding the “political”: A visit to the “village”

This chapter intends to study the process by which the “village” got identified as the bedrock of the “political”, and therefore, the fundamental object of agrarian governance, in British India over the first half of the nineteenth century. I argue that although the “village” was imagined as the quintessential complex of property and political power in India right from the beginning of the nineteenth century, within the next four decades, it emerged as the preeminent object and site of governance through various reconfigurations of its former formulations. As earlier, I make sense of this process by bringing together meanings of the “village” generated in contemporary political-economy, and practices of agrarian governance in several localities of British India, while visiting Cuttack at times in the light of such spiralling journeys. The chapter argues that meanings of the “village” were fashioned out of two articulations of the “political”: one in which the “village” was seen as a landholding body constituted by a variety of power relations, emanating from proprietary rights, and another which perceived it as the basic unit of agricultural production, being both the seat of the peasant-proprietor and an expression of custom, thereby resisting the predatory impulses of despotic political power. A productivist emphasis acted as the main principle of difference between these two meanings. While the former described the “village” as a cardinal site of power, it refused to admit its productive potential. The latter, however, located the very nature of its power in its capacity to obstruct extractive encroachments by superior landholders, and, consequently, stimulate production by securing proprietary rights. These articulations were underpinned by the claim that, since the “village” was the most basic and ancient unit of administration in India, it could legitimately become the authentic object of agrarian governance. I contend that this argument about indigenous authenticity was not external to contemporary political-economic formulations. Such indigenous imaginations were incorporated within contemporary political economy through the latter’s reconfiguration in the light of the “political”. Thus, the re-discovery of the “village” during this time as the most authentic, and therefore, valid site of agrarian governance, was reflective of an epistemological affinity between contemporary

political economy and British Indian agrarian governance, forged by the foregrounding of the “political” in both spheres.

Very few works in South Asian history have critically examined the “village” as a category of governance in the context of nineteenth-century British India. Louis Dumont’s essay can be viewed as the earliest attempt to trace a genealogy of this category. But Dumont, and others who have worked in this area, perceive the problem differently. Their interpretation is based on the assumption that the “village” is equivalent to the “village community”, which, in my opinion, was primarily a crucial category of Henry Maine’s historical sociology, influential in the administrative context of late nineteenth-century British India. Dumont, for example, identifies three different meanings of the “village community” in three distinct phases. He notes that, “We can distinguish three meanings of the expression which seem to predominate in three successive historical phases. In the first phase, the village community is primarily a political society, in the second a body of co-owners of the soil, while in the third phase it becomes the emblem of traditional economy and polity, a watchword of Indian patriotism.”<sup>1</sup> He believes that the category “community” appropriately unites these seemingly disparate meanings. I argue that this reflects a typically structural-functionalist interpretation, as he suggests that “community”, as an equalitarian principle, tied together different characterizations of the “village”. He notes that, “in the prevalent ideology of the period a ‘community’ is an equalitarian group...Dominance, and even hierarchy, are not absolutely ignored by all writers, but they do remain on the whole in the background ...”<sup>2</sup>

Clive Dewey points out that “...awareness of the village community was a creation of the later nineteenth century.”<sup>3</sup> This category, as Dewey documents, was the conceptual cornerstone of a comparative evolutionary perspective on civilizations. He argues that it was produced out of shared assumptions of metropolitan British intellectuals and British Indian administrators. In these currents of thought, the “village community” stood as a mark of ancient, primitive societies, the essential feature of which was collective ownership of property, structured by kinship. This was construed as the original form of all societies, and at the same time, as the past of

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<sup>1</sup>Louis Dumont, “The ‘Village Community’ from Munro to Maine”, *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, IX, December 1966, 68.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Clive Dewey, “Images of the Village Community: A Study in Anglo-Indian Ideology”, *Modern Asian Studies*, 6, 3, 1972, 291.

Europe, and the present of India. A particularly notable figure in this world of representations of the “village community” was Henry Maine. Karuna Mantena’s work presents Maine as the critical link between such representations and the imperial ideology of late nineteenth-century. The focus of this ideology, Mantena notes, was different from the liberal-reformist one which characterized the British Empire over the first half of the nineteenth century. Maine’s classification of societies, based on a comparative and evolutionary method, was the foundation of this ideological shift. She points out that “...nineteenth century theorists such as Maine produced a distinctively *apolitical* model of traditional society...viewing societies as functional, cultural wholes. It was a view that stressed the internal cohesiveness and the communal/corporate orientation of native society...thus de-emphasizing political conflict, change, and agency.”<sup>4</sup> The “village” in Henry Maine’s theoretical framework, Mantena notes, embodied such a “traditional” society.

Both Dewey and Mantena seem to assume that the “village community” was the *only* analytical form in which the “village” was produced as a category of governance in nineteenth-century British India. They share this perspective with Dumont. The only difference is that while Dumont traces the formation of this category over the entire nineteenth century, their focus is restricted to its latter half. In doing this, they overlook the political-economic conceptualization of this category. This chapter, therefore, disagrees with these existing ways of looking at the “village”. I argue that the “village” in early nineteenth-century British India was produced out of a shared discursive space of agrarian governance and contemporary political economy. It was not perceived to signify a cohesive, functional “community”. On the contrary, it was persistently presented as a site of conflict, intrigue and dominance. It was construed as a seminal marker, and the primary geographical site, of power-relations and agricultural production. The “village”, as the central category of agrarian governance in the first half of the nineteenth century was thus significantly different from the sociological “village community” of the late-nineteenth century. It was envisioned as an integral component of the “political” in British India. This chapter will reconceptualize the “village” by bringing forth its administrative investments.

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<sup>4</sup>Karuna Mantena, *Alibis of Empire: Henry Maine and the Ends of Liberal Imperialism*, India, 2010. She further notes that, “This model of native society as an integral whole, held together by reciprocal bonds of custom and structures of kinship, would provide the theoretical foundation, and even a normative justification, for the late imperial ideologies of protection, preservation, and collaboration...” 14-15.

From administrative treatises on authentic “Hindu/Indian” polities and modes of governance, to texts of contemporary political economy, to revenue surveys, to an ideology of occupancy, the “village” was carefully developed as the chief object of agrarian governance in early nineteenth-century British India.

### **A seat of power**

I begin, once again, with the *Fifth Report of the Select Committee on the Affairs of the East India Company*. A discussion of the 5<sup>th</sup> Report is unavoidable, as it prefigured most of the debates over governance of land that pervaded the first half of the nineteenth century. In debating different models of governance, the report, for the first time in the nineteenth century, defined the “village” as a distinct object of agrarian governance. By favoring a “ryotwar” settlement over a “village settlement”, the report inaugurated the possibilities of considering the “village” as a separate, discrete unit of governance. In differentiating between the two modes of settlement, it defined what the “village” signified, as an administrative unit.

The “village” was highlighted in the report as the most fundamental seat of various power-relations around land, in the context of a discussion on the history of land-administration in the Northern Circars, a province in the Presidency of Fort St. George. The report defined the “village” as the most fundamental unit of (agricultural) production and social life. It depicted the “village” as a composite whole of social relations, inhabited by figures performing diverse social roles, primarily associated with production and management of land. Land was the epicentre of this collective, as all occupational groups unrelated to cultivation were remunerated either by parcels of land or by a portion of the harvest. The report documented in detail the different occupational roles existing in the “village”:

“The *Potail*, or head inhabitant; who has the general superintendence of the affairs of the village, settles the disputes of the inhabitants, attends to the police, and performs the duty...of collecting the revenues within his village...The *Curnum*; who keeps the accounts of cultivation, and registers every thing connected with it. The *Talliar* and *Totie*; the duty of the former, appearing to consist...in gaining information of crimes and offences, and in escorting and protecting persons travelling from one village to another: the province of the latter, appearing to be more immediately connected to the

village, consisting, among other duties, in guarding the crops, and assisting in measuring them. The *Boundaryman*; who preserves the limits of the village, or gives evidence respecting them, in cases of dispute. The *Superintendent of Tanks and Watercourses* distributes the water therefrom, for the purposes of agriculture. The *Bramin*, who performs the village worship. The *Schoolmaster*, who is seen teaching the children in the villages to read and write in the sand. The *Calendar Bramin*, or astrologer, who proclaims the lucky or unpropitious periods for sowing and threshing. The *Smith* and *Carpenter*, who manufacture the implements of agriculture, and build the dwelling of the ryot. The *Potman* or potter. The *Washerman*. The *Barber*. The *Cowkeeper*, who looks after the cattle. The *Doctor*. The *Dancing Girl*, who attends at rejoicings. The *Musician* and the *Poet*. These officers and servants, generally constitute the establishment of a village...”<sup>5</sup>

This description, I argue, is immensely valuable for understanding the deployment of the “village” in practices of agrarian governance in early nineteenth-century British India. To begin with, contrary to common historiographical assumptions, this description did not posit the “village” as a self-sufficient community, existing *outside* the domain of the state. In presenting a diversity of occupations, it foregrounded officers like the pottail, the curnum or the talliar, acting as agents of the state. The report described these figures as “officers of inspection, whose business it was to keep an account of the territorial produce, and of everything connected with the rights of the ryots, and of government, as arising from the land...”<sup>6</sup> As it is evident, these officers were seen as guardians of the main proprietary relation, i.e., between the state and the ryot. They were constitutive threads of the assemblage of property and political power. In other words, they were key figures in the “political”. Other members of the “village”, described as servants, were also tied to the state. Their remuneration, consisting of either rent-free land or portions of harvest, came from a public fund.<sup>7</sup> The description in the report, therefore, clearly showed that the “village” was, from ancient times, an administratively-controlled unit of production. Land was

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<sup>5</sup>“The Fifth Report from the Select Committee on the Affairs of the East India Company”, *P.P.*, 1812, 85.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid*, 83-4.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid*, 85.



the fulcrum of this collective, and administration its grand supervisor. The “village” was accordingly characterized as a “...simple form of municipal government...”<sup>8</sup>

Property, production, and political power came together in framing the “village”. It was seen as the quintessential (Hindu) geographical marker of the “political”. In fact, that is why, the report argued, it was prone to abuses of power. Over time, the report noted, the public officers, originally employed in the village to protect the peasantry from the oppression of big landlords and farmers, themselves became agents of despotic power.<sup>9</sup> Even the Company’s government, in its early years, let out lands on short or long leases to individuals. These individuals further sub-rented these territories in parcels of villages, allowing the under-renters to determine the amount and mode of collection from the villages. Quite naturally, all these under-renters became corrupt and oppressive overlords of the villages. The report noted that as soon as the Company’s government was in possession of greater knowledge of their territories, they entered into more specific engagements with the head inhabitants of each village. These village-engagers were, in turn, supposed to enter into engagements with each ryots regarding the rents payable for each field. They were supposed to have formal contracts with the ryots, by granting pottahs, specifying the amount to be paid for particular fields. But even under this arrangement, the disposition to usurpation of power remained undisturbed. The Company’s government found ample evidence of “...the great deceptions and frauds practiced by the village renters, in conjunction with the curnums, in order to conceal the value of lands, and the actual quality and kinds of cultivation; and also of the serious and extensive injuries inflicted on the cultivators by the former...”<sup>10</sup>

A potential of despotism seemed to be inherent in such “village” settlements. To combat it, a new mode of settlement needed to be devised. The report now turned to the ryotwar settlement. Under the ryotwar mode of settling lands, it was argued, a much more transparent, unmediated, and protective relationship could be established

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>The report noted that anciently, these public officers were posted in the “village” so that “...the abuses and irregularity of the zemindars, renters and managers, and of the inferior agents employed in making the collections, could be prevented or restrained...” But in recent times, it was seen that “...the official registers, instead of being checks on the zemindars and renters, had by acceding at first to their views and encroachments, from weakness or venal motives, fallen into contempt, and lost not only their authority, but their emoluments also. Some contenting themselves with the allowance attached to their offices, continued to hold them, as sinecures; while on the other hand, a few who were rich and aspiring, acquired a footing of power and consequence, little inferior to that of a zemindar...” Ibid, 84.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid, 119.

between the government and the principal agents of agricultural production, the cultivators. On the adoption of this principle of settlement, the government faced strong opposition from the potails, the former de-facto masters of the “village”. But eventually the ryotwar was a great success. The report noted that it “...greatly improved the situation of the cultivator, by limiting the bounds of the public assessment, and adjusting the actual demand on each person subject to such assessment, according to his ability to satisfy it;...and securing him in the protection of his property and rights...”<sup>11</sup>

But the “village” was never abandoned as an object of agrarian governance. Its presence, as a fundamental component of the “political” was retained in a reconfigured manner. While the Court of Directors praised the strategy of implementing the ryotwar settlement, the Board of Revenue wanted to fall back upon the ‘village settlements’. In favor of the latter, the Board argued that it was “...as old as the age of Menu.”<sup>12</sup> But the report contradicted the Board’s assertion. It noted that the authentic regulative function of the “village” was maintained under the ancient Hindu government, when rent was collected from the cultivators, who had a partial proprietary interest in the soil. In this mode of administration, the village officers acted as mere agents of the state. But the practice of farming out the revenues of villages was introduced much later, under Mahommedan rule. It is this system of farming and sub-farming, the report argued, which gave birth to corrupt and oppressive overlords like the Zemindars of Bengal and the Northern Circars, and the Potails of Carnatic. Under this arrangement, the Potails in the “village” were no longer government-appointed collectors of rents; they became petty tyrants. In this manner, as I have noted earlier, the 5<sup>th</sup> Report drew up a history of land-administration in India. In this narrative of the past, an authentic, benevolent, Hindu rule was succeeded by a corrupt and degenerate Muslim one.

The abhorrence of a “village settlement”, where the state’s share of the rent was settled with the headmen of the village, was grounded in this perspective. But at the same time, the ryotwar settlement, which was pitted against it, was considered to be inclusive of the original form of the “village”. It was argued that, in the ryotwar mode, the village officers remained in their original roles as servants of the state. They could not exercise unrestricted power over the cultivators. Thus, the report

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid, 124.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid, 157.

argued that in districts under the ryotwar system, rents “...were collected by the potails, in the name and for the use of government, in their natural and constitutional character, as the agents or superintendents of the villages to which they belonged, agreeably to the antient practice of the Hindoos...”<sup>13</sup> Not only the potails, the report noted that in a ryotwar area, other village officers such as the curnums continued to perform their original duties and enjoy their perquisites.

The 5<sup>th</sup> Report’s differentiation between authentic and inauthentic forms of the “village” remained the point of reference for future debates around the category. All these debates emphasized that since the “village” was the basic unit of property, production, and political power, it had to be the object of governance as well. But at the same time, it always embodied tendencies of becoming a seat of corruption and arbitrary power. Since relations of power in the “village” were entangled with conditions of agricultural production, this power-matrix needed to be closely monitored. The report identified the ancient Hindu government with the ideal form of this administrative supervision, and it established the ryotwar, incorporating the “village”, as an embodiment of these principles. This is how, with the turn of the nineteenth century, the “village” was established in administrative discourse as the archetypal seat of power-relations around land in India.

### **The “village” in political economy**

The previous chapter has shown how Holt Mackenzie identified the village zemindars as the authentic collective of proprietors in India. It might appear from Mackenzie’s deliberations that the “village” was merely understood as the proprietary unit of these figures. Property was indeed Mackenzie’s central concern, but it could be envisioned only as a complex of power-relations around land based in the village. This is because what he saw as the authentic form of landed property in India, the putteedari tenure, was rooted in the “village”. In mapping this form of tenure, therefore, the “village” was construed as a composite whole of power-relations emanating from land, in need of meticulous administrative scrutiny and control. A need to know the “village” was already high on the administrative agenda. As Mackenzie noted, the Court was eager to “receive a full and particular detail of all local tenures and usages...of the

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid, 157.

constitution of the village communities and the rights and interests of the classes composing them...”<sup>14</sup> In Cuttack as well, since the question of a long-term settlement was raised in administrative circles, the Court kept emphasizing the need to know the different figures and relations that constituted the “village”. It is evident that by the time Mackenzie devised a plan of settlement, authorities in London were convinced that the “village” was the primary cluster of power-relations on land in India. The idea had taken root that successful governance of land would depend on an effective knowledge of, and control over, the “village”.

Mackenzie maintained that property was the cornerstone of the “village”. But he emphasized that the “village” was a collective in which a variety of relations were woven around property. He believed that it was important to limit administrative interference “...with the constitution of village communities...”<sup>15</sup> But at the same time, he also argued that, “...it is of course desirable to obtain the most accurate possible information regarding them, their leading men and classes, their officers, with their respective functions, and means of support, and an explanation of the degree of force and vigor in which those institutions exist...”<sup>16</sup> I argue that this need to know the “village” intimately was grounded in the fear that it always had the potential of becoming a playground of despotic power. This potential needed to be tamed by the administration. Thus, it was necessary to preserve the “village” as the fundamental organization of agrarian power in India, but only in its pristine form where the distribution of power remained fair. Mackenzie’s prescription of knowing the “village” was, therefore, implicated in this administrative urge of regulating its economy of power.

Mackenzie described in detail the different items to be known in order to “...complete the picture of the village community...”<sup>17</sup> in the course of a settlement. With regard to the proprietors, he noted that “...The origin and nature of their tenure should in all cases be particularly specified...”<sup>18</sup> Regarding the village officers, he

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<sup>14</sup>“Memorandum by the Secretary regarding the past settlements of the Ceded and Conquered Provinces, with heads of a Plan for the permanent settlement of those Provinces—dated July 1 1819”, *Selections from Revenue Records, North-West Provinces, 1822-1833*, Allahabad, 1872, 60.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid*, 130.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid*, 130.

<sup>17</sup>“Extracts From A Memorandum, Dated October 19 1826, By Holt Mackenzie, Esq, Secretary To Government, Explanatory Of The Settlements Effected Under Regulation VII, 1822, And Of The Measures Necessary To Give Better Effect To Its Provisions”, *Selections from Revenue Records, North-West Provinces, 1822-1833*, Allahabad, 1872, 196.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid*.

argued that, "...although we are chiefly concerned with the putwarree and police, yet, as a record of the remainder, with the perquisites received by them, in addition to any land they may hold in jageer, can be made upon the spot with great ease...and the perquisites of the different officers must be taken into account in estimating the gains of the cultivators."<sup>19</sup> As to the different classes of cultivators, he expressed the need to record the nature of all cultivating tenures. Other than these major figures, he also proposed the recording of "hired labourers" and "slaves", if there were any, in the "village". Finally, he suggested that "...a specification of the persons having a voice in the management of village affairs, in the disbursement and audit of the village expenses..."<sup>20</sup> should be entered in the settlement-record. In this way, Mackenzie detailed the entire format of a settlement, which was overwhelmingly concerned with the recording of power-relations. It is this model of settlement, later implemented in Cuttack with some modifications that constituted the "village" as the theatre of agrarian power, and the most fundamental unit of agrarian governance in British India. With the execution of such village-centric settlements, Mackenzie proclaimed, "...we might...soon lay the *foundation* of a greatly-improved system of administration..."<sup>21</sup>

Mackenzie's concern was reiterated in a passionate appeal to protect the "village communities" by Charles Metcalfe. At first glance, Metcalfe's perception of the "village communities" as "...little republics, having nearly everything that they want within themselves, and almost independent of any foreign relations..."<sup>22</sup> appear to be merely the rambles of a romantic.<sup>23</sup> But it is important to look closely at the context in which these statements were generated. Metcalfe was defending a "village-settlement" against a ryotwar one. This is because, like Mackenzie, he also believed that the authentic form of property in India was collective, not individual. His "village

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<sup>19</sup>Ibid.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid, 198.

<sup>21</sup>Emphasis mine, Ibid, 201.

<sup>22</sup>"Minute of Sir C.T. Metcalfe, dated November 7 1830", *Selections from Revenue Records, North-West Provinces, 1822-1833*, Allahabad, 1872, 218.

<sup>23</sup>Eric Stokes describes Munro, Malcolm, Elphinstone and Metcalfe as romantic-paternalists, who were in opposition to the aggressive Utilitarianism of James Mill, Holt Mackenzie and others. I disagree with this classification. It is evident that in the context of the settlement of the North-Western Provinces, Mackenzie and Metcalfe both emphasized the need to protect the "village zemindars". Not only did Mackenzie not fit into the Utilitarian framework, as understood by Stokes, neither did Metcalfe unambiguously belong to its opposite, the romantic-paternalist school. The ryotwar mode of settlement, which according to Stokes exemplified the romantic-paternalist line of thought, was opposed by Metcalfe. Mackenzie, whom he described as an ardent supporter of the rent doctrine and its radical critique of property, argued vigorously in favour of the retention of property-rights of the 'village zemindars'. See Eric Stokes, *The English Utilitarians and India*, Delhi, 1989, 8-25 & 110-39.

community” was, thus, primarily the authentic proprietary unit—a collective of cultivating-proprietors. The ryotwar settlement, Metcalfe thought, was aimed at granting proprietary rights to individual cultivators. Such an intention was based on a categorial confusion. Thus, Metcalfe noted, “great confusion of ideas might be produced by the misapplication of English terms which is common in our official revenue language. *We talk of estates, when we mean villages, and of proprietors, when we ought to speak of village communities...*”<sup>24</sup> As I have noted in the earlier chapter, with Mackenzie, Metcalfe and their likes, the erstwhile notion of the individual cultivator being the true proprietor, along with the sovereign, underwent a reinterpretation, by which the collective of cultivating-proprietors, or village-zemindars were posited as the authentic proprietary unit. Metcalfe’s opposition to the ryotwar was informed by the same presuppositions. He believed that settlements with individual cultivators would dissolve the fabric of proprietary-relations that constituted the “village-community”.

Metcalfe, however, did not reject the principles of a ryotwar settlement. He thought that applying the methods of a ryotwar settlement would be highly beneficial, “...as it would bring to light the owners of every portion of land, and the right of each member of the village community, without rendering it necessary to conclude engagements otherwise than with the village community jointly represented by their headmen...”<sup>25</sup> He further noted that these representatives must be selected with care. As he pointed out that, “There is reason to suppose that in many a village, where the real proprietors were once numerous, some upstart fellow has acquired, without right, or by fraud, an ostensible pre-eminence, and now pretends to be sole proprietor...it will be necessary to be most cautious not to sacrifice the proprietary rights, such as they are, of the numerous proprietors of villages, to the pretensions of one or a few who may have brought themselves more into notice, and obtained predominance, whether by fair means or by foul...”<sup>26</sup> With Bentinck’s resolutions on land-tenures, as I argued in the previous chapter, such discrimination between true and false members of the collective of village-proprietors got enshrined in the legislation that was to be the basis of the settlement in Cuttack.

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<sup>24</sup>“Minute of Sir C.T. Metcalfe, dated November 7 1830”, *Selections from Revenue Records, North-West Provinces, 1822-1833*, Allahabad, 1872, 214, emphasis mine.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid, 222.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid, 217.

It is evident that the formulation of the “village” had changed significantly since the 5<sup>th</sup> report. The 5<sup>th</sup> report’s preference of the ryotwar was rooted in the perception that proprietary rights were vested, albeit partially, in the individual cultivator. In the report, the “village”, as a network of power-relations, primarily signified an administrative mechanism revolving around that proprietary right. That is why greater emphasis was placed on the protection of the cultivators’ rights by the state. The advocacy of ryotwar was primarily based on a desire to establish an unmediated relationship between the individual cultivator and the state. The “village”, as an organic unit of administration, was seen as an aid in establishing and maintaining this relationship. However, in determining the authentic domain of the “political”, the vision of the ryotwar had to carefully suppress equally powerful claims of authenticity by the “village”. Thomas Munro had himself pointed out that the “village” was the most ancient unit of agricultural production and social life in India. But this was contradictory to Munro’s proposal of the ryotwar, which established a direct relationship between the state and the cultivator, as the most ancient, and thereby, authentic expression of the ensemble of proprietary relations and political power in India. In order to resolve this contradiction, Munro asserted that although the “village” had its autonomy as an arena of property and power, the sovereign was the *ultimate* owner of soil in India. Stein notes that by such a reinterpretation, “Corporate village membership is transformed by Munro to individual membership by the metaphoric equivalence of the ruler and landlord...it also altered the idea of ‘raiya’, who is changed from being a part of a corporate village body into an equivalent of ‘tenant’, thereby generating the transcultural metaphor or analogy—Indian sovereign or East India Company to landlord, raiya to individualized tenant. In this way, both the corporate village and the individual peasant cultivator were preserved as bulwarks against the imposition of the Bengal zamindari settlement while at the same time maintaining the purportedly direct historical relationship between cultivator ‘tenant’ and government ‘landlord.’”<sup>27</sup>

In this manner, the ryotwar was able to present the relationship between the landlord-state and the cultivator-tenant as the most authentic articulation of the “political”, while retaining the legitimacy of the “village” within this vision. The “village” was, nevertheless, pushed to the background as Munro gradually developed

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<sup>27</sup>Burton Stein, “Idiom and Ideology in Early Nineteenth Century South India” in Peter Robb (ed.) *Rural India: Land, Power and Society Under British Rule*, New Delhi, 1992, 50-51.

the principles of ryotwar in the course of his administrative experience in Baramahal, Kanara, and the Ceded Districts during the first decade of the century. The ryotwar scheme was clearly more concerned with the nature of the relationship between the state and the cultivator, trying to improve, by various means, the productive potential of the latter. An idea of directness between the state and the domain of production was at the heart of the ryotwar. That is why, as Stein notes, it was able to defeat the alternative proposal of a settlement based on village-lease. Stein points out that, “Munro outlined and justified a plan to reduce or obliterate the resource command of all superior land-controlling men. These last included not only peasant caste leaders...with authority over localities consisting of many villages, but even those whose dominance was limited to one or two villages. In effect, Munro was proposing to strike at the powers and rights of any magnate by whom major decisions about the utilization of men and land were made.”<sup>28</sup> Although ryotwar’s legitimacy was claimed on the basis of its indigeneity, it was evidently underpinned, as I have argued earlier, by a Ricardian vision of the sphere of distribution—in this case, consisting of the landlord-state, and the cultivator, embodying capacities of both farmer and labourer. Thus, the directness in the vision of ryotwar, expressed a specific political-economic conceptualization of the interrelatedness of the domain of production and distribution.<sup>29</sup> This, as I have shown in chapter two, was a reinterpreted Ricardianism, but not of the James Mill variety, as it did not insist on a high level of revenue demand based on a radical critique of rent-property, and a prescription of extracting the full rent. The ryotwar was ready to leave some rent-property in the hands of the cultivator, by pitching the demand low, and not taxing the improvements on the land carried out by the cultivator.

But with Mackenzie, Metcalfe and the debates of the Ceded and Conquered Provinces, the “village” as a collective, replaced the investments that had earlier gone into the figure of the cultivator. Unlike the 5<sup>th</sup> report, the practices of agrarian

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<sup>28</sup>Burton Stein, *Thomas Munro: The Origins of the Colonial State and His Vision of Empire*, Delhi, 1989, 58.

<sup>29</sup>Stein also hints at this directness as the essence of ryotwar. However, he views it differently, more as a question of politics, than political economy. “There is nothing of sentiment for the small farmer nor historical precedent here. Munro was proposing nothing less than the completion, by administrative means, of the military conquest of the Baramahal territory...by stripping the ancient gauds and karaikkars of their locality resource control, and even further by limiting village heads in their command over share-cropping labour and converting them into mere subordinate revenue servants of his own subordinate tahsildars, Munro was introducing a new and very distant authority—ultimately that of London—*directly* into the South Indian—or any Indian—agrarian system, for the first time.” Ibid, 59, emphasis mine.



governance now construed a collective—the “village-proprietors”—as the ancient authentic proprietor, in conjunction with the sovereign. The “village” was, accordingly, seen as a matrix of power-relations woven around this corporate entity. The stated administrative intention now was to establish a direct relationship with the “village”. Those landholders who could not establish themselves as bonafide members of the “village” were seen as obstructions to the establishment of such a relationship. As noted in the last chapter, the contempt Mackenzie expressed for big landholders such as the zemindars and the talukdars emerged from this perspective. However, these figures were subsequently reincarnated as real members of the “village” and reincorporated within the administrative scheme of settlement.

This shift in emphasis, from the individual cultivator to the “village”, was not limited to agrarian governance in British India. It was, as I have argued, part of a much broader, geographically dispersed, analytical space. I intend to read this shift in the light of the critical assault launched by Richard Jones and others against the epistemological assumptions of contemporary, predominantly Ricardian, political economy. Jones’s critique rested on an analytical primacy of the domain of distribution in political economy. Jones demonstrated that this domain consisted of an assemblage of proprietary relations and political power, which varied in the different nations of the world. This assemblage, or the “political”, emerged as the epistemological object of this new political economy. The “political” in “Asiatic” nations, Jones argued, was distributed over a range of relations of power on land, between different kinds of landholders and landholding bodies. The category of “property”, in this framework, was understood as an *effect* of this matrix of power. Jones perceived the “village” as a crucial site of power in the “political”.

Commenting on the mode of power on land in India, Jones noted that the “village” is “...the groundwork of Hindu polity.”<sup>30</sup> Interestingly, he used the long passage from the 5<sup>th</sup> report that I have quoted earlier in describing the “village” as a conglomerate of various roles, related to agricultural production. Further, he pointed out that the “village” is a “...complete, compact and independent body, politic and ecclesiastic, containing within itself all the elements of government...”<sup>31</sup> It should be clear by now that Jones, as if in conversation with the discourse of British Indian

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<sup>30</sup>Rev. William Whewell (ed.) *Literary Remains, consisting of Lectures and Tracts on Political Economy of the late Rev. Richard Jones*, London, 1859, 214.

<sup>31</sup>Jones’s use of the long passage from the 5<sup>th</sup> Report can be found in pp 214- 15.

administration, presented the “village” as the fundamental fabric of power-relations on land in India, and, thereby, the most authentic, ancient unit of administration. In times of peace, he argued, the “Indian/Hindu” polity consisted of a network of subordinate interests ranging from the sovereign to the zemindar to the pottail to the ryot. In this network, the “village” was tied to the government by village officers such as pottails. Jones also noted that in a despotic “Asiatic” nation such as India, the “village”, as a self-governed body, acted as a protective to the incursions of government. In a comparative light, he observed that, “A system not very dissimilar...in the United States of America, is found to bind together a loosely constructed society.”<sup>32</sup> However, in discussing the different forms of land-settlements in British India as part of his political economy lectures at Haileybury, Jones argued that “in former days the headman had been under control and responsibility. The old village system which we had rashly destroyed, had provided checks to their power...The new set of headmen turned out exceedingly avaricious and oppressive...”<sup>33</sup> Presumably, here Jones was referring to the settlements in Western India. He thought it was illegitimate to grant these village-headmen exclusive proprietary rights. This is because he understood the “political” of India as a dispersed arena of power. The “village” was an important constituent of this arena, but only along with other relations of power.

The “village” featured in John Stuart Mill’s political economy as well. Like Jones, Mill also considered the “village” as one of the sites of the “political”. In fact, for Mill, it was one of the most important sites where property, production and political power were knitted together, because it was also the seat of the peasant-proprietor. Mill argued that the peasant-proprietor’s proprietary status was embedded in a collective, which was the “village”. He noted that, “There were...village communities, consisting of the reputed descendants of the first settlers of a village, who shared among themselves either the land or its produce according to rules established by custom, either cultivating it themselves or employing others to cultivate it for them, and whose rights in land approached nearer to those of a landed proprietor, as understood in England, than those of any other party concerned. But the proprietary right of the village was not individual, but collective; inalienable (the rights of individual sharers could only be sold or mortgaged with the consent of the

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<sup>32</sup>Whewell (ed.) *Literary Remains*, 215.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid, 289-90.

community) and governed by fixed rules.”<sup>34</sup> Thus, the “village” was not only a proprietary collective, but also the embodiment of custom, which ensured the productive role of the peasant-proprietor. The centrality of the peasant-proprietor in Mill’s framework made him envision the village as a productive unit of power. This was not so for Jones. While appreciating its power in limiting the despotic potential of government, Jones found the “village” to be an obstacle to the growth of productive capacities. He noted that the “village”, “...by excluding the principle of competition...”<sup>35</sup> weakened the productive potential of the cultivators.

I argue that the construal of the “village” by practices of agrarian governance in British India shared the premises of both political-economic categorizations of the “village”. On the one hand, it was understood as a vital ensemble of power-relations on land. On the other hand, it was also seen as the proprietary locus of the peasant-proprietor, enabling him, through custom, to emerge as the most productive figure amidst the sinews of agrarian power.

### **In the field: agoraphobia and its cure, the *khasra***

In this section I argue that during this period the production of the “village”, as a cluster of power-relations, got embedded in one of the most cardinal practices of agrarian governance, namely, surveying. Surveys were never concerned with the physical features of the land only. From the very beginning, they attempted to generate information on the relationship between the land, its inhabitants, and the government. That is why, in narrating a history of cartographic operations in British India, Phillimore attached immense importance to the “revenue surveys”. He observed that, “In the train of topographical and geographical surveys, there followed the special revenue surveys, so essential to sound administration...*The tiresome details of revenue surveys touch moreover on an important aspect of sociology, the relations of Government with the tillers of the soil...*The civil officers of the British *raj* were pre-eminently occupied with this complicated subject.”<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup>John Stuart Mill, “Chapters on Socialism”, (1879), J.M. Robson (ed.) *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill, Volume V-Essays on Economy and Society Part II*, Toronto, 1967, 281.

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid*, 216.

<sup>36</sup>*Historical Records of the Survey of India*, Collected and Compiled by Colonel R.H. Phillimore, Dehradun (U.P.), 1952, Volume III, (1815-1830), p ix, emphasis mine.

None of the agrarian histories of nineteenth-century Bengal have taken the issue of “revenue surveys” seriously enough. As large parts of Bengal Presidency remained under the “Permanent Settlement” throughout the nineteenth century, it seemed to be an underlying assumption of these histories, that detailed revenue survey operations, like the ones taking place in the Southern or Western parts of British India, were never undertaken in Bengal. The lack of work on revenue surveys also imply that the administrative urge to know land conditions in detail was non-existent in Bengal. In this historiography, meticulous administrative investigations of land are associated with areas outside Bengal. Bengal is considered to be a short-hand for permanently settled areas, where it is assumed that since 1793, administrative scrutiny of land was *permanently* stalled. Such histories ignore the fact that throughout the nineteenth century detailed surveys were carried out in many parts of Bengal; mostly in the temporarily-settled areas, but also in some parts of the old permanently-settled areas.<sup>37</sup>

As soon as the Company acquired its earliest territories, Phillimore pointed out, “Surveys of the new possessions (after Plassey and in 1760 grant of provinces of Chittagong, Burdwan and Midnapore) were ordered by the local council, and encouraged from London. The first thought was to ascertain the extent of cultivated land and the value of their revenues...”<sup>38</sup> In the newly-conquered district of Carnatic in 1790, there was a proposal for an establishment of Assistant Revenue Surveyors under District Officers. Phillimore noted that “...a school was provided for their professional training...The first duties of the revenue surveyors was the preparation of a topographical map of the district, to which they added much information about cultivators and the possibilities of irrigation as would be helpful to the district officer.”<sup>39</sup> In Bengal, however, elaborate surveys could not be conducted successfully. Phillimore tells us that, “The detailed measurement of individual fields was a matter for which the native staff remained responsible...The district officers in Bengal had

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<sup>37</sup>Ratnalekha Ray’s seminal contribution to the agrarian history of Bengal makes the point that the British were interested in *knowing* the landed society of Bengal. But her work argues that the aim of this knowledge-seeking drive ended with the implementation of the permanent zemindary settlement. Ratnalekha Ray, *Change in Bengal Agrarian Society c1760-1850*, New Delhi, 1979, 8. Eric Stokes makes a similar assumption, on the basis of which he does not include Bengal in his discussion of the relationship between Utilitarian thought and agrarian administration in different parts of British India. Stokes, *The English Utilitarians*.

<sup>38</sup>*Historical Records of the Survey of India*, Collected and Compiled by Colonel R.H. Phillimore, Dehradun (U.P.), 1945, Volume I, (Eighteenth Century), 1.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid*, 7.

never succeeded in obtaining satisfactory or trustworthy results from such measurements and in 1793 Lord Cornwallis authorized the introduction in that Presidency of the system of Permanent Settlement, which it was hoped would, amongst other advantages, obviate any interference of Government with details of revenue collection....”<sup>40</sup>

It has been noted in the previous chapters that the critique of the permanent settlement was lodged in a desire to know the power-relations around land in every locality more intimately. The various settlements in the southern parts of British India were grounded in detailed investigations of the land and its inhabitants. Expressing similar intentions, the Court of Directors urged the Bengal government for a “...patient and laborious scrutiny of individual rights, a careful investigation of local peculiarities, together with a minute and detailed survey of the extent, cultivation, and productive powers of the territory...”<sup>41</sup> The detailed inquiries into relations around land characterizing Mackenzie’s plan of settlement, were grounded in practices of surveying. I have already argued that the “village” was the conceptual cornerstone determining the objects of inquiry. This was reflected in the fact that by the turn of the nineteenth century revenue surveys officially adopted the “village” as the geographical unit of investigation.

F.C. Hirst, while describing the revenue surveys conducted in Bengal, Bihar, Orissa and Assam during the first half of the nineteenth century, noted that “The information collected previous to 1789 regarding the limits and areas of existing estates, was incomplete, and, probably, sometimes, very inaccurate, and it is easy, therefore, to see that, early in the nineteenth century, Collectors of Districts affected by the Permanent Settlement found themselves in difficulties as to what land has actually been included in the Permanent Settlement.”<sup>42</sup> It is evident from Hirst’s statement that the surveys which were conducted in the permanently settled areas used the “estate” as their unit of operation. But the new surveys, launched in different parts of British India since the permanent settlement, based themselves on the “village.”<sup>43</sup> However, Hirst

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<sup>40</sup>Ibid, 8.

<sup>41</sup>*Historical Records of the Survey of India*, Collected and Compiled by Colonel R.H. Phillimore, Dehradun (U.P.), 1950, Volume II, (1800-1815), 178.

<sup>42</sup>F.C. Hirst, *Notes on the Old Revenue Surveys of Bengal, Bihar, Orissa and Assam*, Calcutta, 1912, 1.

<sup>43</sup>Even Phillimore makes a similar observation: “...in districts under the permanent settlement, the survey was concerned mainly with the boundaries of the estates or *mahals*, not with those of the *mauza* or village area...” *Historical Records of the Survey of India*, Collected and Compiled by Colonel R.H. Phillimore, Dehradun (U.P.), 1960, Volume IV, (1830-1845), 179. It will also be useful here to

himself was unable to explain this change. He noted that, “whether the area dealt with was permanently settled or not, it was found convenient, in all but very exceptional circumstances, to adopt the village recognized locally, as the *real* unit of survey. The reason assigned for this is not clear...”<sup>44</sup> If inadequate information and inaccuracy were conceived to be the only problems of the former surveys, the change in the unit of investigation would not have been necessary. Hirst tried to explain the change in terms of administrative expediency. He argued that the “village” was the smallest and most generally used administrative unit. He also noted that other “ancient land divisions”, like the *pergunnahs*, consisting of similar tenures, soils and customs, had fallen out of use for years. Moreover, at present, the administration of estates was based on villages.

The suggested incomprehensibility of this change gives way to clarity when we take a look at the discourse of agrarian governance in the early decades of the nineteenth century. In that discourse, the centrality of the “village” as the seat of landed-power and the starting-point of administration had been established beyond doubt. The discourse of surveying was also rooted in anxieties over the geographical register of power. Practices of surveying established the “village” as the geographical container of the most authentic, fundamental unit of power.

Bernardo Michael’s essay on revenue surveys is an important exception in this otherwise-neglected area of inquiry. Bernardo argues that these surveys were primarily intended to reconstruct neat territorial boundaries. However, I think he simply misconstrues the significance of the revenue surveys. The main purpose of revenue surveys, in my opinion, was to record a power-complex on land. That could only be done by basing surveys on the “village”, as by that time, the “village” had been established as the site of this power-complex. Bernardo states that discontinuous *pergunnah* boundaries were the main obstacles in the way of basing surveys in *pergunnahs*. But territorial continuity was not the main reason for adopting the “village” as the *real* unit of survey. Even Hirst did not think that this was the primary reason behind the change of the unit of survey. The reason resided, as I see it, in the discursive production of the “village” as a constituent element of the generality of power on land. The aim to connect the village map with a general district map was a

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remember Metcalfe’s comment, where he pointed out that a misapplication of English principles on agrarian categories in India made officials falsely perceive “village communities” as “estates.”

<sup>44</sup>Hirst, *Notes on the Old Revenue Surveys*, 3.

*territorial* concern of administration. The revenue surveys, with their basis in the “village” were constituted by greater structural and political investments. The boundary question was not the central problematic of revenue surveys, as Bernardo claims by highlighting the gradual reorganization of discontinuous *pergunnahs*; the “village” was.<sup>45</sup> This will be clearer as I point out the primary object of knowledge in such village-based surveys.

The revenue survey was preceded by a *thak* survey, the object of which was to “demarcate finally on the ground the boundaries of all villages and estates in the area for survey.”<sup>46</sup> The *thak* survey was followed by the *hasra* survey, which recorded various details surrounding each plot of land. The *hasra chitta*, or field book, noted down the *tauzi* number in the collector’s rent-roll in which the field fell, the name of the estate to which the field belonged, the names of the proprietor and the cultivator, the size of the field, its location with respect to the field measured last, and a description of the soil and the crops. Hirst pointed out that these details, before being entered in the field book, were “...called out loudly for the information of the villagers present at the time...”<sup>47</sup>

In the Ceded and Conquered Provinces, as debates over a plan of settlement went on, Board of Revenue officials emphasized the importance of surveys in documenting the power-relations on land. They observed that, “It was the design, we believe, of the Government which enacted the settlement law of 1822, that the rights of all persons connected with the land...should be carefully ascertained and

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<sup>45</sup>See Bernardo A. Michael, “Making Territory Visible: The Revenue Surveys of Colonial South Asia”, *Imago Mundi*, 59, 1, 2007, 78-95. Mathew Edney argues in his book that there was a huge gap between “the desire and the ability to implement the perfect panoptical survey, between what the British persistently thought they had accomplished and the hybrid cartographic image of India which they had actually constructed...” Mathew Edney, *Mapping an Empire: The Geographical Construction of British India (1765-1843)*, Chicago & London, 1997, xiii. Edney tells us how each local survey was supposed to put flesh to the skeleton that was being centrally assembled through the Great Trigonometrical Survey operations. But at the level of incorporation into the central knowledge-bank, the attempt to impose order on the detail of the surveys was interrupted. “Whatever order was imposed on the detailed surveys came *after* the fact, when they were incorporated into the general archives. The order did not derive directly from the surveys themselves. What the British implemented was not the ideal, but only the *image* of the ideal.” (30). It is evident that Edney also works within the distinction of an outside and an inside, a pure ideal and a contaminated practice. This dissertation is generally not interested in drawing such unadulterated binaries. Such distinctions, I argue, were part of the process of creating the field of the “political” in all its complexities. Failure to match generalities with local details was part of the process of surveying. That did not upset, or displace, the main object of the survey, namely, the matrix of power on land rooted in the “village”.

<sup>46</sup>Hirst, *Notes on the Old Revenue Surveys*, 8.

<sup>47</sup>*Ibid*, 48.

recorded...”<sup>48</sup> The khasra, they argued, “...seems to constitute the record requisite for the purpose.”<sup>49</sup> The khasra was perceived to be the bulwark of the settlement; a document on which the specificities of power, organized as the “village”, would be carefully inscribed. It was envisioned as the archives of power. The officials remarked, “It will be seen that this paper connects every person, whether putteedar or ryot, lakherajdar or village servant, with the fields in which he has either a permanent or temporary interest...”<sup>50</sup>

In the discourse of governance, the khasra signified a text of total knowledge, which would act as the basis of infallible control. By registering the configurations of power, it was supposed to aid the administration in preventing unauthorized domination. Mackenzie noted that if the rukba, or the settlement-record, was not rooted in such detailed enlistment of the relations of power, “Wyeranee villages and waste lands will...be gradually usurped by the neighbouring Zemindars, alluvian lands...will never be traced...boundary disputes will be frequent and intricate, and the future identification of the lands now assigned for the village watchmen or other officers will be a matter of the greatest difficulty; and other lakhiraj land will probably be absorbed in the Malgoozaree...”<sup>51</sup>

Such mouzahwar, or “village” surveys, based on khasras, were carried out in most of the temporarily-settled areas of Bengal presidency, including Cuttack.<sup>52</sup> They were conducted mostly by native personnel. Prominent landholders or engagers of government revenue in the villages were involved in these survey operations. But the

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<sup>48</sup>“Letters from the Board of Revenue on Deputation, dated May 26 and July 22, 1831, and from the Governor-General, dated June 14, 1831, with copy of a letter and its enclosure from the Resident and Chief Commissioner at Delhi”, *Selections from Revenue Records, North-West Provinces, 1822-1833*, Allahabad, 1872, 270.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid, 274.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid, 281.

<sup>51</sup>“Memorandum by the Secretary regarding the past settlements of the Ceded and Conquered Provinces, with heads of a Plan for the permanent settlement of those Provinces—dated July 1 1819”, *Selections from Revenue Records, North-West Provinces, 1822-1833*, Allahabad, 1872, 68.

<sup>52</sup>Phillimore noted that with regard to Behar, “The Sudder Board...at first contemplated that the survey should be mehalwar, that is, confined to a definition of estates paying revenue to Government, instead of mouzahwar, comprehending the definition of all minor tenures, similar to the survey of the North Western Provinces.....” However, after much deliberation, the Board concurred that the survey in Behar should be mouzahwar. After this decision, there was further debate over the need to adopt khasreh surveys in this region. “The adoption of the khasra, or native measurements, as a part of the survey...was also discussed. The Western Board contended that the khasra was requisite for the protection of the Government...as well as for the benefit of the people...” Although the Board rejected the idea of adopting khasra surveys for Behar, later, in 1842 some khasra surveys did happen in parts of Behar. In Orissa, Midnapoor, and Chittagong, however, Khasra surveys were carried out. *Historical Records of the Survey of India*, Volume IV, (1830-1845), 180.



record was finalized, as it has been noted earlier, in the presence of assemblies of cultivators in every village.<sup>53</sup> In this manner, revenue surveys comprised of an array of practices which established the “village” as the geographical core of land-administration in early nineteenth-century British India. The settlement-record, which emerged out of the *khasras*, was purported to be a mirror-image of the complex fabric of power-relations on land in each village.

### **Membership Matters I: Officers and servants**

It is time to turn to the members of the “village”. Matters of such membership were painstakingly deliberated and sorted out in the course of settlement operations in various parts of British India over the first half of the nineteenth century. I will be taking a close look, as earlier, at the settlement affairs of Cuttack in order to depict the encounters which fixed disparate figures in their respective locations within the “village”. As I argued in the previous chapter, the figures reigning supreme in the “village” were proprietors or revenue-collectors of various descriptions. Property was indeed the gravitational centre of the “village”. But in the discourse of governance, the “village” was imagined as a totality of power, arranged as an economy, distributed over a range of figures. Administration was supposed to act as a custodian of this economy, regulating its excesses. It has been noted in the previous section that the *khasras* were geared to this purpose. By registering the legitimate configurations of power, the settlement-record was supposed to prevent its usurpation by the dominant actors of the “village”. For this purpose it was important to delve into the profiles of the myriad members of the “village”. Thus, the Governor-General’s list of inquiries for every village began with “...a specification of the different members, forming the constitution of a village...”<sup>54</sup> In this section, I will discuss those figures which were styled, in accordance with their roles, as “village officers” and “village servants”. As

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<sup>53</sup>In an abstract of instructions issued to Canungos and measuring Aumeens, the Collector of Balasore noted that the settlement-record is to be prepared, “on the ground in the presence of all the people.” He also stated that the assessing officer will “examine the Pottahs of the Ryots the papers of the Putwaree compare them question both parties and then assess.” Old No. 465, Acc. No. 93C, July 16 1835 to November 16 1835, *Cuttack District Records, Revenue*, OSA. This process was described in detail in the settlement papers of Cuttack. See, “Papers on The Settlement of Cuttack and On The State Of The Tributary Mehals,” *Selections from The Records of The Bengal Government*, No. III, Calcutta, 1851, 16-18.

<sup>54</sup>“No. IV Letter from the Governor-General, to the Sudder Board of Revenue on Deputation, Dated Camp, Pinjore, April 7 1831”, *Selections from Revenue Records, North-West Provinces, 1822-1833*, Allahabad, 1872, 265.

this section will show, a fortification of their locations by administrative practices contributed crucially in outlining the precise contours of power in the “village”.

Amongst the village officers, the patwari, or the village-accountant, was an object of continuous administrative engagement in the first half of the nineteenth century. It has been noted earlier that the most significant sphere of transactions between different landholders was rent, which was a crucial marker of the “political”. In the administrative discourse of the early decades of the nineteenth century, the village-accountant was imagined as a figure who could potentially act as a supervisor of this domain of power. There was a renewed interest in this office, as the Board of Revenue noted, in a letter to the governor-general in 1816, “...We have not thought it necessary to prescribe to the Putwarees any particular form of accounts... A specimen of the series of accounts generally kept up by the Putwarees in the district of Cawnpore was submitted to your Lordship...by our accountant Mr. Newnham who has long directed his attention to the study of Revenue accounts and of the village details of the territorial assessment. That series in the mutual connection of its several parts with each other appears to possess every requisite of clearness and accuracy...”<sup>55</sup> Around the same time, the collector of Cuttack emphasized the need to retain the village and district accountants, so that the records kept in the vernacular by the former could be translated into Persian abstracts, without “...the inconvenience of removing local accounts to a great distance from the places when they may be constantly required...”<sup>56</sup> This statement indicated that a need to have the village-accountant, as a record-keeper of power, located *within* the village was being acutely felt in administrative circles.

There were other concerns as well. The figure of the patwari had to be sanitized in order to be vested with the crucial responsibility of preventing abuses of power. It had been argued in the 5<sup>th</sup> report that such village officers often, in alliance with superior landholders, became instruments of fraud and oppression. Keeping in mind such tendencies, administrators argued that the patwari had to be kept out of the influence of the landlords. In 1827, the collector of Hidgelee, an area adjacent to Balasore, noted that he had chosen, as patwaris, individuals from the “...present Bisooeis or Village Collector of Rents to make these officers the joint servants of the

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<sup>55</sup>April 23, 1816, No. 25, *BRP*, WBSA.

<sup>56</sup>*Ibid.*

Ryots and the state.”<sup>57</sup> It was suggested by officials in Cuttack that the patwaris should be paid partially in land and partially out of the rents of the ryots. Such a practice, it was argued, had been followed in Khoordah, which made these officers there, known as the *Bhoees*, “...equally independent of the heads of villages and of the Ryots...”<sup>58</sup> In 1831, the Commissioner of Cuttack rejected the collector’s suggestion of allowing the zemindars to pay salaries to the patwaris. He remarked that, “If they are to be appointed solely by the zemindars and looked upon as their servants they will assuredly carry on the system hitherto pursued, they will fabricate papers to promote the sinister interests of their employers, they will defraud the Government and oppress the Ryot...The Zemindar might be permitted to select but the voice of the Village Community should be consulted previous to confirmation and the Collector should have the power of rejecting any individual proposed for the office...”<sup>59</sup>

In this manner, it was emphasized that the appointment of the patwari should be made under the vigilance of the collector and other members of the “village”. The administration, however, was not in a position to totally control these appointments. For this reason, a deep sense of anxiety prevailed wherever the patwaris were seen as capable of transgressing the legitimate limits of power. As the collector of Pooree noted, “In a great portion of this District, that office is not on a proper footing, as the Mokuddums, who are the proprietors of their respective villages and interested in benefiting themselves at the expense of the Cultivator, are the Patwaris...”<sup>60</sup> But given the centrality of the “village” in the discourse of administration, the patwari was also envisioned as a legitimate member of this field of power. Despite so much skepticism, he had to be granted admission to the “village”.

Much greater administrative discretion was exercised in matters of appointment related to the “village police”. A village officer of great importance, the “village police” was viewed as an organic caretaker of law and order in the “village”. In Cuttack, the paiks, as former members of the landlord’s private army, were considered naturally suited to this role. The paiks, in their former capacities, enjoyed lands free of rent granted by the landlords. As it has been noted in the previous

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<sup>57</sup>Acc. No. 48B, January 1833 to January 1835, *BDR, Revenue, OSA*.

<sup>58</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup>“To the Secretary, SBOR, from Commissioner’s Office, 27<sup>th</sup> May 1834”, Acc. No. 48B, January 1833 to January 1835, *BDR, Revenue, OSA*.

<sup>60</sup>“To R. Hunter, Commissioner of Cuttack, from W. Wilkinson, Collector, Pooree, 9<sup>th</sup> July, 1833”, Acc. No. 48B, January 1833 to January 1835, *BDR, Revenue, OSA*.

chapter, the rebellion in 1817 was perceived in administrative circles to have been fuelled by an extensive resumption of these lands in the early years of the Company's rule in Cuttack. Since the rebellion, the government had already adopted a more cautious strategy with respect to resumption of such lands. Moreover, once the "village" was established as a legitimate field of power-relations in the discourse of administration, these village officers were readily preserved in their respective locations as bonafide members of this collective.

A great number of such rent-free service lands were in existence in Talooka Panchguri, southern Cuttack. The collector noted that, "...any interference with these tenures, whether held under former orders of Government or otherwise, is much to be deprecated."<sup>61</sup> Similarly, in pergunnah Phulwari, zillah Balasore, large quantities of lands were held by fifty-two paiks. The settling officer recommended a full-scale resumption of these lands. The commissioner disagreed with him. He noted that at present the Paiks attend the Balasore thanah. But the earning from the land is so less that they fulfil their duties by rotation in groups of ten. He insisted upon retaining these men by pointing out that they are a "useful and cheap class of officers..."<sup>62</sup> In most cases the paiks were included within the fold of the "village" as deserving candidates for the office of the village police. In pergunnah Searee, for example, the collector noted that, "The Police establishment attached to this Pergunnah consists of 2 Sirdars 6 Paiks and 3 Digwars. The office (and lands appertaining thereto) held by these individuals appears from local inquiry to have been handed down to them as their hereditary right..."<sup>63</sup> Although paiks were preferred for the office of the village police, they were not the only group which took up such responsibilities in Cuttack. In Killu Mootree, the collector remarked, "I wanted the former Paiks to undertake the Chokeedaree duty, but the office is considered so degrading that no one though many was well inclined would venture to break through the deep rooted prejudice against it, and accept the appointment. There being no low caste men in these villages fit for the office, the former Chokeedars 3 in number Mussalman and servant of the zemindar's were entertained..."<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>61</sup>"Copies of Memoranda on certain Settlements in Bauleah, Cuttack, Chittagong and Murshidabad Divisions by Mr. F.J. Halliday, Secretary to the Board of Revenue, Deputed to Settlement work, 1837-1838", *SBOR—Settlement Proceedings*, WBSA.

<sup>62</sup>Pergunnah Phulwari, Zillah Balasore, Division Cuttack, Mouza Sahoopara, *Ibid*.

<sup>63</sup>Acc. No. 16B, F. No. 30, April 1825 to April 1838, *BDR, Revenue*, OSA.

<sup>64</sup>Old No. 134, Acc. No. 102C, 02.01.1837 to 22.05.1837, *BDR, Revenue*, OSA.

A variety of “village servants” involved in non-agricultural occupations were allowed to retain their service lands. As described in the 5<sup>th</sup> report, they were perceived as important constituents of the “village”. In Balasore, for example, a settlement report noted that “The...Barbers, Dhobees, Blacksmiths, Carpenters have been allowed to retain their Jageers.”<sup>65</sup> In pergunnah Saibeer, the village astrologer was allowed to retain the six beegahs of land that he enjoyed rent-free.<sup>66</sup> The settlement reports of almost all villages bore testimony to such administrative strategies of maintaining an entire network of “village servants” as hereditary and legitimate members of the “village”. The “village”, however, did not only consist of officers and servants.<sup>67</sup> These functionaries owed their existence to production on land, which was carried out by a variety of cultivators. Agricultural production, as the fountainhead of government revenue, was the bedrock of power on which these figures acquired their own footholds. It becomes necessary, therefore, to turn to those who were viewed by the administration as cultivators of land, in order to get more acquainted with the “village”.

### Occupancy as ideology

From the beginning of the nineteenth century the ryot, or the peasant cultivator, remained entangled in the vision of the “political”. As I have shown in the previous chapter, the figure of the ryot, or the cultivating-proprietor, was continuously reconfigured over myriad sites of governance during this period. Using the spatio-temporal classificatory framework of the “local”, traces of the authentic cultivating-proprietor were identified amongst a variety of landholders, ranging from the big landlords to representatives of villages. The logic of the “local” invested the vision of the “political” with an expansive potential, by virtue of which the original ryot could be discovered almost everywhere in British India. But the figure of the ryot, or the original cultivating-proprietor could not remain as an undifferentiated category. Further hierarchical classificatory indices emerged which started differentiating between different kinds of cultivators, and determined the status of the ryots in British India during this period. These hierarchies, I argue, were produced out of transformed

<sup>65</sup>Old No. 506, Acc. No. 95C, August 1835 to November 1835, *BDR, Revenue, OSA*.

<sup>66</sup>“Copies of Memoranda on certain Settlements”, *SBOR—Settlement Proceedings*, WBSA.

<sup>67</sup>For one more example, see the settlement report of Talook Kurnsunkurpore, Pergunnah Sunawut, Zillah Balasore, Acc. No. 70B, Old no. 107, April 1838 to April 1839, *BDR, Revenue, OSA*.

political-economic categories, and emerged as crucial constituents of the category of the “village”.

It will be useful here to briefly recapitulate the journey of the “ryot” within changing articulations of the “political”. Thomas Munro envisioned the figure as embodying in itself capacities of landlord, farmer and tenant. Describing the ryot-proprietor, Munro noted that, “The demand for public revenue...affects his share; but whether it leaves him only the bare profit of his stock, or a small surplus beyond it as landlord’s rent, he is still the true proprietor, and possess all that is not claimed by the sovereign as revenue.”<sup>68</sup> By postulating that authentic proprietary rights in land were vested in the “village-zemindars”, Mackenzie repositioned the ryot, by grounding his proprietary status in the “village”. It is here that the question of occupancy in the “village” emerged as a crucial mark of authenticity for the cultivating-proprietor. Mackenzie noted that such “village-zemindars” were not the only cultivators of the soil in the “village”. The cultivators were primarily of two kinds. The *khodkasht* ryots were firmly attached to their cultivating fields, possessing a prescriptive right of occupancy, dependent on the payment of a rent based on fixed rates. The *pyekhasht* ryots, on the contrary, were traveling cultivators, without a fixed residence in those villages, the lands of which they cultivated. Mackenzie further argued that where the “village-zemindars” were cultivating-proprietors, he considered “...the only real description of *khodkasht* Ryots to be of the family of the Zemindar...”<sup>69</sup> As it is evident, the question of occupancy, as the marker of authenticity, operated to segregate different kinds of cultivators. Mackenzie’s preference for a “cultivating yeomanry” now got hooked to the question of occupancy.

But Mackenzie’s formulations were crucially redefined by Bentinck in his minute on land tenures. Bentinck’s reappraisals were particularly important as they laid the guidelines for the settlement in Cuttack. Echoing Mackenzie’s representations, he noted that the collective of “village-zemindars”, or the “...Putteedari is the original and natural tenure of all the lands in the Country...”<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>68</sup>Ibid, 40.

<sup>69</sup>“Memorandum by the Secretary”, *Selections from Revenue Records, North-West Provinces, 1822-1833*, Allahabad, 1872, 96.

<sup>70</sup>William Bentinck, “Minute on Land Tenures”, Enclosure to Circular No. 190, November 12, 1833, To Commissioners of Revenue (317-51), *Circular Orders of the SBOR at the Presidency of Fort William; Including the Rules of Practice for the Guidance of the Board and of the Commissioners of Revenue, from the year 1788 to the end of August 1837*, Calcutta, 1838, IOL. Also in Revenue, 1832-33, Acc. No. 43B, BDR, OSA.

But he proceeded beyond Mackenzie's framework by delineating the respective status of various cultivators with regard to the authentic proprietary form. Like Mackenzie, Bentinck began by emphasizing that among the ryots, the true proprietors were only those who were genuine members of the cultivating collective of putteedars. Bentinck pointed out that, "I am of the opinion that throughout the country there are three descriptions of Ryots. The first class I consider as being to all intents and purposes proprietors of the lands which they cultivate, the second as having been originally tenants at will, but acquiring in course of time a prescriptive right of occupancy at fixed rates, and the third as mere contract cultivators."<sup>71</sup> Further, in describing the first kind, Bentinck, repeating earlier representations of the "ryot-proprietor", gave the example of the meerasidars of Deccan.<sup>72</sup> As examples of the second and third kind in the context of Deccan, Bentinck spoke of the judeed and pykasht ryots. The meerasidars, Bentinck observed, lost their proprietary status during the Muslim rule, and were reduced in status to occupant-cultivators, or ryots of the second kind in Bentinck's scheme.

Thus, according to Bentinck, "...originally in all parts of the country, there were two classes of resident Ryot, the one belonging to the class of original proprietors and possessing a right derived by inheritance from the original occupants of appropriating the surplus produce of the soil after satisfying the Government demand, the other having no defined rights, but still entitled to consideration, on proof of prescriptive occupancy..."<sup>73</sup> In this way, residence in the village became a mark of the proprietary lineage of the ryots. All resident cultivators were, however, not considered to belong to the league of the original proprietor-ryot. But they were considered higher in rank than the migrant cultivators. The same classification prevailed in Cuttack as well. In describing the tenures of Cuttack, Andrew Stirling noted that he could not find traces of the original proprietor-ryot. But in the 1820s, a discussion ensued amongst the Court of Directors and officials in Cuttack where the mourosee mokuddums of Cuttack were seen as similar in status to the meerasidars of the south. In this discussion the mokuddums of Cuttack were believed to embody traces of the original class of proprietary ryots. Over the course of a long debate finally it was determined that proprietary rights would be granted by separately

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<sup>71</sup>Ibid.

<sup>72</sup>Ibid. In the "5<sup>th</sup> Report" the "ryot-proprietor" was discussed in terms of the same example of Meerasidars. See "5<sup>th</sup> Report", 104-06.

<sup>73</sup>Bentinck, "Minute".

investigating the proprietary claims of mokuddums in every mouzah. Following such a procedure, some mokuddums were indeed granted proprietary rights. In being admitted as proprietors, these mokuddums were perceived as cultivators. But their cultivator-status was envisioned entirely in terms of a legacy of the past. In the present, they were not necessarily cultivators. The present cultivators of Cuttack were grouped according to Bentinck's framework, as hereditary occupants and migrants. These were the occupant cultivators, or the thanee ryots, having their residence and rates of rent fixed, subject to the payment of Government revenue, and the migratory cultivators or the pykasht ryots.<sup>74</sup>

As it has been argued, in the discourse of governance, the "village" was considered the most fundamental unit of agricultural production around which relations of power were distributed. Surveying reflected the importance of closely monitoring the "village", as the smallest geographical unit of power and production. In tune with this imperative, during the settlement in Cuttack, cultivators were classed according to their varying functions with respect to cultivation *within* the "village". In this scheme of ranking, "occupancy" was much privileged over "migrancy". Being physically located in the "village", instead of being a visitor to it, was considered more beneficial for agricultural production.

Bentinck had already observed that the thanee ryot, or the occupant cultivator enjoyed quite a few privileges. Their rents were fixed, rights to grazing of cattle on waste land, and use of forest produce were reserved, and they were allowed to have the lands on which their houses were built rent-free. These endowments were rooted in the premium laid on occupancy in the "village". These ryots were considered chief cultivators of the "village". In Cuttack as well, administrative practices tried to secure their conditions of cultivation. In a letter to the commissioner, Mr. Mills, the collector of a district in Cuttack, noted that, "It must be borne in mind that it is our interest to maintain the Thanee Ryots in possession of their house and lands..."<sup>75</sup> Attaching the ryot to his lands and homestead, reflected the preference for a "cultivating yeomanry" which was always articulated in the discourse of agrarian governance throughout the

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<sup>74</sup>The "thanees" ryots of Cuttack, Bentinck noted, were similar in situation to the occupant cultivators of the Madras Presidency. He pointed out that, "...Cuttack would appear to resemble the adjoining provinces of the Madras Presidency, in which it is stated that, throughout the country from Nellore to Ganjam, the occupant cultivators...though enjoying the right of holding their lands from generation to generation, subject to the payment of the public dues, derived from it no rent and had never been known to dispose of their tenures by sale..." Ibid.

<sup>75</sup>July 14, 1837, No. 153, *SBOR—Settlement Proceedings*, WBSA.



first half of the nineteenth century. In spite of the differences in their perspectives, Munro and Mackenzie both envisioned the peasant-proprietor as the leading cultivator. However, as the “village” got foregrounded as the fundamental unit of power on land, the domain of cultivation also got arranged with reference to it. An assumed hereditary presence denoted a permanent and superior membership of the “village”. Accordingly, it both capacitated and disempowered different groups of cultivators.

E. Repton, acting collector of Balasore emphasized that “With regard to the Thanee Ryot...A definite rate must be fixed, and the necessity of an interchange of Pottahs and Cabooleuts has been so frequently urged by the Court of Directors and the authorities in this country that I can hardly imagine it can be negated.”<sup>76</sup> Fixing the rent of thanee ryots was considered a necessary incentive for improvement. These ryots, as I have mentioned, were considered potential improvers, primarily due to their fixed, hereditary location within the “village”. In their improving role, they were often compared with English farmers. As R. Hunter, commissioner of Cuttack noted, “A khoodkasht ryot should, like the English farmer, be encouraged to go hand in hand with his landlord in improving his lands and if such is effected by the aid of the landlords funds...”<sup>77</sup> It was strongly believed that fixed rates would ensure protection from exactions by superior landlords, and enable agricultural improvement. It was noted by Repton that, “If the Zemindar, when the season for tilling commences, may demand an increase of rent or turn the former cultivator out, what encouragement is held out for an industrious labourer? No man will expend money in the improvement of his land, if he is thus liable to be ousted at the will of his landlord...”<sup>78</sup> A low rate of rent was prescribed in order to leave enough scope for improvement in the hands of these ryots. In Talooka Bishnubur, Mr. Hunter fixed half of the calculated gross produce as rent. With regard to such a strategy, the commissioner, Mr. Mills observed that, “...I would have rather allowed him half of what remains from the gross produce of the land after deducting all expenses balancing such calculations with the rents actually found to have been paid...”<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>76</sup>July 14, 1837, No. 155, *SBOR—Settlement Proceedings*, WBSA.

<sup>77</sup>Acc. No. 48B, January 1833 to January 1835, *BDR, Revenue*, OSA.

<sup>78</sup>July 14, 1837, No. 155, *SBOR—Settlement Proceedings*, WBSA.

<sup>79</sup>Talooka Bishnubur, Pergunnah Bakrabad, Zillah Cuttack, “Copies of Memoranda on certain Settlements”, *SBOR—Settlement Proceedings*, WBSA.

Thanee ryots were privileged in many ways, primarily because of their settled, occupant status within the “village”. The issue of location comes out clearly when the strategies aimed at the pahee ryots are considered. The pahee ryots, Ricketts noted, “Are those tilling lands in villages in which they do not reside...”<sup>80</sup> The settlement officer in Pergunnah Searee, Balasore district described the characteristics of pahee ryots in detail: “The Pahee Ryot has no hereditary or transferable property whatever in the land he cultivates...These ryots are constantly changing their lands. Should the past season’s experience induce them to think that the soil they then cultivated is not sufficiently fruitful to repay them...they resign their engagements at the end of the year and enter into fresh ones...for some more productive lands in another village...”<sup>81</sup>

Interestingly, the “village” figured in the classification of cultivators in such a crucial manner that the same cultivator was granted different designations and awarded unequal privileges depending on his different locations, within or outside the “village”. Accordingly, it was noted in the settlement report of a particular area in Cuttack, that, “The Pahee Ryot is generally an inhabitant or the son of an inhabitant of one of the villages in this or a neighbouring Pergunnah in which he holds lands as a Thanee Ryot.”<sup>82</sup> Rents of these ryots were not fixed owing to their migratory status. Settlement officers suggested that their rents should depend on the bargains they are able to strike with the zemindar. The Board concurred partially with this opinion, and ordered that the formation of a detailed list of pahee ryots is unnecessary. But at the same time since rent was perceived to be the effect of power-equations between superior landlords and cultivators, it was considered essential to provide some protection to even pahee ryots. Thus, lands occupied by pahee ryots were classed at a particular rate, which was entered in the settlement record, so that the zemindars could not place illegitimate demands on them.<sup>83</sup>

Occupancy, as a virtue, was also central to the exaltation of the figure of the peasant-proprietor in contemporary political economy. Property, in this vision, was translated as belonging. It expressed a relation of cultivation between a person and the

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<sup>80</sup>“To G. Stockwell, Commissioner of Revenue for Cuttack, from H. Ricketts, Collector, Balasore, October 20, 1831”, “Answer to Questions”, October 1831, Acc. No. 36B, *BDR, Revenue*, OSA.

<sup>81</sup>Reports of Settlements made in the Bustah Division, Pergunnah Searee, Balasore Deputy Collectorship, Acc. No. 16B, Old No. 30, April 1825 to April 1838, *BDR, Revenue*, OSA.

<sup>82</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>83</sup>“To Commissioner of Cuttack, from Collector, Pooree, March 18, 1839”, Acc. No. 77B, Old No. 115, January 1839 to December 1839, *BDR, Revenue*, OSA.

objects he owned. Property was a relation which made the person feel at one with these objects, through actions of continuous care, attention, and nurturing. This is how William Thornton presented the life-world of the peasant-proprietor. Physical residence in his property, and an unwavering attention to it defined the peasant-proprietor. His industriousness was proverbial; his self, a purely productive one. Evidence presented from several countries of Europe brought out in vivid detail the worlds of such peasant-proprietors: “Anywhere in the neighbourhood of Zurich, in looking to the right or left, one is struck with the extraordinary industry of the inhabitants...every shrub, every flower is tied to a stake; and where there is wall fruit, a trellice is erected against the wall to which the boughs are fastened, and there is not a single twig that has not its appropriate resting-place.”<sup>84</sup> About Switzerland generally, Thornton noted: “The little spots of land, show the same daily care in the fencing, digging, weeding, and watering.” The owners, he continued, “have a kind of Robinson Crusoe industry about their houses and little properties; they are perpetually building, repairing, altering, or improving something about their tenements.”<sup>85</sup>

However, the same vision which celebrated the peasant-proprietor also denigrated another kind of producers, namely, the day-labourers, or contractual cultivators. It was argued that while the former was reputed for their industry, the latter was notorious for their indolence. Once again, property was seen as constitutive of productivity. Thornton emphasized that it was the lack of a proprietary title in the case of the day-laborers, which generated their careless and wasteful nature. He observed that, “the small farmer...is subject to no immediate compulsion. No one can forbid his sitting down as soon as he is tired, or taking a holiday whenever he feels inclined;...But although he is exempt from the same compulsion, he is stimulated to exertion by influences much stronger than any that affect the hired labourer...He has little or no inducement to exert himself further; he has no certainty of gaining an increase of wages by so doing...”<sup>86</sup> John Stuart Mill repeated the same hierarchy. He saw the day-labourers as possessing all those vices which were engendered by an unproductive existence. Mill argued that, “Day-labourers...are usually improvident; they spend carelessly to the full extent of their means, and let the future shift for itself...The tendency of peasant proprietors, and of those who hope to become

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<sup>84</sup>W. T. Thornton, *A Plea for Peasant Proprietors; With The Outlines Of A Plan For Their Establishment In Ireland*, London, 1848, 20-22.

<sup>85</sup>Ibid, 23.

<sup>86</sup>Ibid, 19.

proprietors, is to the contrary extreme; to take even too much thought for the morrow...They deny themselves reasonable indulgences, and live wretchedly in order to economize.”<sup>87</sup>

Such were the inclusions and exclusions of the contemporary political-economic investments in the figure of the peasant-proprietor. I argue that agrarian governance in British India privileged the thanee over the pahee ryot following the same logic. The thanee was imagined as the archetypal peasant-proprietor, occupying the village lands, and improving agricultural production. As opposed to this, the pahee was perceived as the migrant, contractual cultivator, without a dwelling in the village, and, therefore, without a productive commitment to its lands, always in the hunt for better opportunities elsewhere.

Long occupancy of lands in the “village” was not only the basis for classifying cultivators. In the discourse of land-administration, occupancy generally signified authenticity. The right of holding lands lakhiraj, or rent-free was also verified on this ground. The resumption laws declared that, “By the orders of the Supreme Government...Lakherajdars who have enjoyed long possession and whose tenures have been held in good faith are on resumption of their lands to be allowed possession at half rates for thirty years...”<sup>88</sup> In several instances, even if the lakhirajdar was unable to produce valid documents, namely, grants confirming the rent-free status of the land, simply on the basis of his physical occupation of the plot of land at that time, and certification of his conditions by witnesses from the “village”, the lands were not resumed.<sup>89</sup> Deputy collectors were instructed to choose these witnesses carefully. It was noted that only elderly people of the “village” could act as witnesses, in validating long occupation. It was also emphasized that these witnesses had to be, either physically resident in that particular “village”, or related to it in some official capacity. In the circular to his deputies, the commissioner observed that, “Young men cannot be witnesses of what happened...years ago, neither do I think that inhabitants

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<sup>87</sup>John Stuart Mill, *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill, Volume II—The Principles of Political Economy with Some of Their Applications to Social Philosophy (Books I-II)* [1848] ed. John M. Robson, Toronto, 1965, 261.

<sup>88</sup>June 12, 1838, No. 20, *SBOR—Miscellaneous Proceedings*, WBSA. In this letter, the Commissioner observed, after discussing the opinions of the collectors, that, 14<sup>th</sup> October 1791 should be admitted “as the date of possession since which is to be considered long possession.”

<sup>89</sup>As examples, see September 4 1839, No. 42, July 17, 1839 Nos. 55 and 57, *SBOR—Miscellaneous Proceedings*, WBSA.

of different villages and estates can know much about the matter...”<sup>90</sup> He further noted that if these methods failed, the “village ruqba”, or the old village records, should be examined in order to verify claims of possession of rent-free lands.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have shown how the “village” was fashioned as the archetypal site of the “political”, and thereby, the chief object of agrarian governance in British India over the first half of the nineteenth century. The “village” was envisioned as a reservoir of agrarian power. Since it was represented as the most ancient form of social organization around agriculture and, the primary geographical unit of governance, it was also perceived as incorporating the greatest range of these power-relations. Further, it was seen as the protective abode of the most productive agent in Indian agriculture, namely, the peasant-proprietor. Its characteristic as a circumscribed territory had the potential of addressing administrative anxieties, which had grown, since the permanent settlement, out of a failure to *locate* power geographically. The distaste towards big landlords, or the zemindars of the permanent settlement, was rooted in the perception that men on the spot, of various kinds, were the true players in the field of power. That is why figures who had occupied lands within the “village” for a long time were judged as key actors in the ensemble of power. Privileging village-residence went hand in hand with denigrating outsiders. In contemporary political economy as well, celebration of the sedentary peasant-proprietor was tied to deprecation of the day-labourer. Also, in order to discern such figures, visiting the spot, by adopting village-based surveys, was necessary. The “village” was found to be a suitable remedy to such an administrative unease with ‘distance’. For all these reasons, it was perceived as the most authentic form of the power-ridden spot, which needed to be mapped for good governance.

The upcoming chapter will open up another range of reconfigurations of the “political”. Through a close examination of several petty, quotidian disputes around land in Cuttack, I will show where the logic of the “political” broke down, and where it got strengthened, in new ways. By focusing exclusively on evidence from Cuttack,

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<sup>90</sup>“Circular No. 55, To DC’s employed in Resumption, from E. Repton, September 1, 1838”, Acc. No. 72B, Old No. 109, March 1838 to January 1842, *CDR—Revenue*, OSA.

it will bring out in detail a variety of situations which shaped the specific articulations of the “political” in a locality. The chapter will highlight workings of power amidst different actors in a locality, and demonstrate how the field of the “political” acquired its own bearings in Cuttack over the first fifty years of Company rule.

## Chapter Six

### Debating directness: subjects and disputes in Cuttack

This chapter intends to explore the ways in which the “political” got articulated in a locality. Unlike the previous chapters, here I present evidence only from Cuttack, analyzing a variety of disputes around land over the first fifty years of the nineteenth century. These disputes appeared, got debated, and were adjudicated at various layers of the judicial apparatus of the district. In studying the myriad issues at stake in these legal battles, this chapter attempts to perform two related analytical tasks. On the one hand it traces the ways in which the matters in conflict engaged in a continuous conversation with the twin articulations of the “political” which, as I showed in the previous chapters, formed the organizing principles of agrarian governance in early nineteenth century British India. On the other, it also charts out a field of dispersal and simultaneous rearticulation of this framework and its constituent categories. I demonstrate these dispersals through a variety of disputes amidst different kinds of landholders in Cuttack, which while remaining grounded within a general governmental logic, also hinted at its limits, thereby opening up fresh ground for reconfigurations.

The specificities of these disputes in Cuttack, I argue, need to be located within a continuous network of organization, dispersal, and reconfiguration, which the categories of “rent”, “property” and “village” underwent within classificatory grids of the “political” and the “local”. In the previous chapters I argued that it is through a complex circuit of travelling localities that the figures of zemindars, ryots, village-proprietors, pudhans, mokuddums, serberakars, meerasidars and many more were assembled as chief actors in the agrarian landscape of British India. These figures were defined differently and accordingly, acquired varying degrees of prominence in the field of power in different localities. As I have shown, since the critique of the zemindary settlement in Bengal, there was a general negative disposition towards big landlords in matters of agrarian governance. This was followed by a recasting of the peasant cultivator as the original proprietor of the soil, with various grades of cultivators being allotted different degrees of proprietary rights. These different

denominations of proprietary cultivators were then rearranged and redistributed within the category of “village” in the North-Western Provinces. The “village” was imagined as the most ancient and authentic bedrock of power-relations on land. Consequently, the “village-proprietor” acquired a degree of eminence in the variegated field of proprietary power that it had never enjoyed before. But at the same time, as I have argued earlier, another articulation of the “political” construed proprietary power as partial and distributed, which is why the “zemindar”, the “village-proprietor” and the “ryot” remained invested with some degree of proprietary-right in land.

This chapter narrows down at one locality to explore how different kinds of agrarian subjects were formed from within contentions between these two different visions of the “political” in British India. In discussing these contentions, it simultaneously highlights how the chief components of the “political”, such as “rent”, “property” and “village” were pushed beyond their general formulations by the force of events. The first section, for example, discusses a situation where certain complex relations of exchange of goods between a group of potters and the temple of Juggernaut, were reduced to progressivist, modernist binaries of abstract-concrete, barter-money, and other similar ones by Company officials. Through these processes of abstraction, the potters were recast into normal, rent-paying agrarian subjects, or “ryots”. The section highlights the strategies of resistance adopted by the potters in the encounter, and the failure of the officials to understand the irreducible singularity of the economy that existed between the temple and the potters. The section shows how the governmental framing of “rent” was deployed in this case to tame heterogeneous and different relations of power.

The second section introduces the discursive logic which framed a huge range of conflicts in the locality, and shaped different agrarian subjects in the process. I describe this logic as a relentless striving to achieve directness, or immediacy, in the exercise of agrarian power in a locality. This chapter shows that it was shared by all actors, ranging from the government to the individual ryot. It kept reappearing in various guises in different disputes, engendering complex, often contradictory alliances, and shifting targets. It often fought against the framing of dispersed power; but at times also mobilized the latter towards its own ends. The second section shows how the government insisted upon defining “property” in terms of possession, or immediate/direct presence on the lands, often going against other important attributes



of “property” like rights of alienability, if it clashed with the former. I argue that this insistence did not always produce certain results, as proprietors in many cases could not be matched with possessors.

The third section shows how agrarian actors in Cuttack, like the zemindars, defined their proprietary status in the language of directness, using the term “intermediary”, to depict village-level landholders as obstructions in the path of a direct relation of power between zemindars and ryots. The fourth section shows how a general negative predisposition towards zemindars in the discourse of governance construed the claims of the former as deceitful. This was complemented by a favourable attitude towards village-level landholders like mokuddums and serberakars. The latter, this section argues, also couched their claims in the idiom of the authenticity of directness, demanding proprietary capacities superior to the zemindars. Taken together, these sections also highlight how the figure of the “farmer” emerged as the determining principle of authenticity in these debates. The classical political-economic construal of the “farmer” as the agrarian capitalist, or ideal improver, was entirely discarded here. In these debates the “farmer” stood as the negative image of “improvement” and authenticity, as the rapacious contractual leaseholder, from whom all other agrarian actors with claims of representativeness tried to distance themselves.

The fifth section argues that claims of directness as authenticity by mokuddums were not always lodged within local genealogies. The mokuddums often argued for their proprietary legitimacy in terms of a general classification of tenures, which went beyond a particular locality. Thus Cuttack mokuddums wanted their proprietary claims to be evaluated in the light of regulations pertaining to other similar tenures, like patnis in Bengal. Even the government invoked such similarities, without necessarily being able to always establish credible registers of comparison. But it was clear that the labelling of these village-level landholders as “intermediaries”, or “under-tenures” did not always work, as their claims to superior, more authentic, and more immediate proprietary positions in the topography of the “political” had to be admitted. The last section shows how the category of “intermediary” failed to generate any stable, fixed referent, as a variety of agrarian actors, ranging from zemindars, to lakhirajdars, to mokuddums, to pudhans all directed the term towards each other to claim greater authenticity, and more immediate form of authority in the intricate web of power-relations in the locality.

This term, “intermediary”, I note, has been used to denote a fixed group of landholders, usually the village-level ones, by the government, and even a number of notable historians. I put forward a critique of these works by highlighting the discursive logic informing changing uses of “intermediary”. I argue that it is the problematic of directness of power which defined the tenor of disputes in a locality, and determined the multiple referents which the term offered. All along the first half of the nineteenth century, therefore, I argue, battles were waged by a range of agrarian actors to establish claims over full presence on land, or achieve immediate/direct forms of power in the locality.

In the process there were continuous reconfigurations of agrarian categories, from the Ricardian formulation to the Jonesian one, from the administrative practices of the Bengal and Madras Presidencies and the North-Western Provinces, to J. S. Mill’s engagement with the “political”, from the government’s search for real proprietors to varied alliances between different landholders in battles over acquiring directness of power in Cuttack. These were all acts of *localization*, whereby the “political” was performed and created at every successive site of reconfiguration, indicating the limits of its constituent categories, and opening up fresh pastures for further change. The “local”, therefore, was not a single, bounded geographical locality, but an analytical possibility invested in a variety of sites, textual or otherwise, within which categories of the “political” got organized, revealed their limits, and generated new reorganizations.

These were also processes of subjectification of agrarian actors. Following Deleuze’s reading of Foucault’s *dispositif*, I argue that in this agrarian apparatus, subjects were created by the various lines of force that the “political” and the “local” generated in different contexts. The lines of force in the apparatus turned, twisted, clashed against each other, broke away from fixed paths of movement, to create subjects, as excesses of the established networks of knowledge and power. As Deleuze notes: “Foucault discovered lines of subjectification...the discovery of this new dimension arose out of a crisis in Foucault’s thought, as if it had become necessary for him to redraw the map of social apparatuses [*dispositifs*], to find for them a new orientation in order to stop them from becoming locked into unbreakable lines of force which would impose definitive contours. Leibniz gave exemplary expression to this state of crisis which sets thought on the move again when one thinks a resolution has been found: we thought we were in port, but we were cast back

out into the open sea...”<sup>1</sup> This chapter thus tries to understand what such movements in the apparatus meant for the various agrarian groups in the locality. By highlighting the immediate, specific, and quotidian issues at stake in the locality I underscore the specific dynamics of a field of subjectification. A study of this dynamics, I argue, will explain the structuring of the relationships of dominance and marginality, generated out of changing alliances between the major agrarian subjects in the locality. The chapter will show that while the village-level landholders were undoubtedly the leaders of the locality in Cuttack, they had to continuously compete with other groups to reach this position.

### **Why were the Coomars, of Coomarpara, asked to pay “rent”?**

In 1812, the acting collector of Cuttack reported to the Board of Revenue that the ryots of mouza Coomarpara in the Suttais Hazaree mehal refused to pay revenue to the farmer. In order to explain the dispute, G. Warde, the acting collector, elaborated upon the situation of these ryots. The ryots of Coomarpara, he noted, were potters who got exempted from the payment of revenue by a sunnud granted by one of the ancestors of the Raja of Khoordah on the condition that they would supply their earthen pots for the use of the temple of Juggernaut. For years, therefore, the potters supplied their pots to the temple, in exchange of which they got a certain quantity of Mahapersaud (the holy food offered to the deities and shared by the devotees). Warde noted that the Coomars, in turn, sold the Mahapersaud. Such a fixed and regular supply of pots, he argued, was the only form of payment that was taken from the Coomars, which quite evidently, did not entail any use of money. Warde, however, insisted that this supply of goods, and the Mahapersaud granted in exchange, was perceived not only as a certain kind of “revenue” payment, but also as a very definite one, measured in terms of an exact monetary value. He argued that this exchange had always been translated into a monetary arithmetic in the accounts of the temple and the revenue receipts of the Government, which included a certain amount of revenue imposed on the potters. He described the arithmetic in the following terms: “It does not seem...that they ever actually paid any revenue, for as the cost of pots which they

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<sup>1</sup>Gilles Deleuze, “What is a Dispositif?” in *Michel Foucault Philosopher*, ed. Timothy J. Armstrong, New York, 1992, 161.

supplied exceeded the amount of revenue they were never called upon for any payment. In exchange for the pots which they furnished, they were allowed Mahapershaad...to the value of 2350 Khawuns, which they disposed of. This sum with the amount of the Jummah assessed on the Mehals making together 2770 Khawons was the price of their annual supply of pots.”<sup>2</sup>

The amount of revenue taken from the potters was, therefore, 450 Khawuns, which consisted of a tax on their profession and ground rent. As the Company’s government had, by policy, abolished all forms of Sayer duties or taxes on items of commerce, Warde noted that it could still legitimately demand from the potters the amount remaining under the head of ground rent. Translated further into Company Sicca Rupees, this amount was considered to be Rs. 53.10, which the Tehsildar or farmer of the mehal was supposed to collect from the potters.

I will argue that three exercises of abstraction, and consequent reconfiguration of certain relations of power, were simultaneously deployed by the Company’s government in reaching the category of “rent”. Firstly, a concrete exchange of goods was recast as having been always also understood in an abstract monetized form. This operation was aimed at dismissing the possibility of conceiving this exchange in terms of an irreducible singularity, by refiguring it as always and already convertible into generalized terms. This convertibility enabled a second reconfiguration, of understanding the monetized form in the light of established governmental categories of “sayer duties” and “ground rent”, which subjectified the actors involved in this transaction as simultaneously potters and ryots. This opened up space for the final operation of abstraction, by which the subject could be reproduced as being implicated in a specifically agrarian form of relations of power. As the “sayer duties” were abolished, now the taxable subject could be exclusively represented as a rent-paying “ryot” in relation to a rent-receiving “farmer”.<sup>3</sup> The actions of this “ryot” could now be made meaningful in terms of the familiar category of “rent”, which was the entry-point to the field of the “political”, indicating, as I demonstrated in the previous chapters, a generalized mode of agrarian power, that between dominant and subordinate landholders. These abstractions were processes of creating subjects of

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<sup>2</sup>“To Secretary to the Board of Revenue from Acting Collector, Cuttack”, May 29, 1812, No. 35, *BRP*.

<sup>3</sup>In the discourse of agrarian governance, the tehsildar of a government estate was perceived as a tax-collector, embodying the functions of a farmer. Such a categorization rested on the landlord-farmer-ryot classification, in this case portraying the farmer as the “improver”, and also the collector of rent, on behalf of the landlord-state.

agrarian power; they were aimed at making Coomars ryots, or legitimate actors in the sphere of the “political”.<sup>4</sup>

These operations of abstraction were, however, punctuated by certain actions of the Coomars of Coomarpara. The Coomars not only refused to pay rent, but also withheld their regular supply of pots to the temple on being charged for ground rent by the farmer. Warde, of course, came up with an explanation of their behavior by first positing and then trying to further analyze, a gap in the generalizability of conversion. He suggested a necessary incompatibility or an unbridgeable gap between the two units of conversion. This incompatibility, however, was not seen as indicative of an irreducible singularity of the act of exchange. Rather, it explained the exchange in other, equally general terms. The dispute arose, Warde argued, because, “...the Coomars had never made any payment in money...”<sup>5</sup> Thus, he thought that “...they either did not comprehend the transfer made in the accounts of the temple & that the amount of their revenue was deducted from the quantity of Mahapersaud supplied to them or they apprehended that if they paid the revenue an additional supply of holy food would not be furnished to them equal in value to the amount of it.”<sup>6</sup> Warde analyzed the dissent in terms of the Coomars’ failure to understand the convertible monetary arithmetic of their exchange. Since the Coomars’ never paid actual money, they were perceived by Warde to be without the capacity to understand their concrete actions of exchanging goods in equivalent abstract terms of paying money. The Coomars in this mode of explanation were once more subjectified in the generalized terms of the category of the primitive, who could not look at their concrete “actions” in terms of abstract “thought”, and, therefore, understand the convertibility of goods into money. That is why Warde also thought that the Coomars believed that if they paid money, they will no longer receive Mahapersaud; in other words, if they entered into a monetary form of exchange, they will not be allowed to participate in the older exchange of goods. The Coomars’ intransigence was explained in terms of an

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<sup>4</sup>Following Foucault, I look at these processes as those of subject-formation produced by the exercise of discursive power. Foucault notes that subjects are created in a double-edged manner: “There are two meanings of the word *subject*: subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power which subjugates and makes subject to.” See Michel Foucault, “The Subject and Power” in Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, Chicago, 1982, 212. With the Coomars, as the section will argue, these strategies of subjectification were majorly interrupted. The Coomars refused to get subjectified within the folds of the “political”.

<sup>5</sup>“To Secretary to the Board of Revenue from Acting Collector, Cuttack, May 29, 1812”, No. 35, *BRP*.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*

either/or, a binary between “barter” and “monetised exchange”. It was seen as reflective of a “primitive” mentality which could work only within a simple binary logic.

Ultimately the Coomars were recast as rent-paying ryots, or normal agrarian subjects. Warde’s perception of their primitivity made him request the Board of Revenue for a remission of their rent. However, as the Coomars had already been presented as rent-paying ryots, Warde also argued that the tehsildar might place illegitimate demands on them. This was pretty much in line with the contemporary perception of Government-appointed revenue-collectors as having the tendency of becoming rapacious farmers oppressing the ryots.<sup>7</sup> But the Board wanted the Coomars to remain within the specifically agrarian form of power that was woven around the category of “rent”. They pointed out that, “it would be more regular for the farmer to collect what is an item of Jummah in his farm...If the farmer collects more than he is entitled to the Coomars may seek redress in the Court.”<sup>8</sup>

Does the reticence of the Coomars towards becoming rent-paying “ryots”, or normal agrarian subjects, tell us anything beyond its official explanation in terms of a certain primitivity? Was the resistance merely one of those edgy “transitional” moments in an otherwise inevitable evolution of a “primitive”, “barter” economy into a “modern” “exchange” one? Was it the story of an essentialized opposition between the “concrete”, as goods, and the “abstract”, as money? When the Coomars stopped supplying pots to the temple, an alarm was raised at the corridors of governance by the temple authorities. It was reported to the collector, that, “...unless some adjustment be effected great inconvenience will be experienced in the temple on the approaching festival of the Chandan & Snan Jattrra from the want of earthen pots...”<sup>9</sup> It’s clear from this anxiety that the regular supply of pots was crucial to the functioning of the temple. I have noted earlier that the Coomars seemed to believe that if they paid rent in money, they would receive a lesser quantity of Mahapersaud than before. While the collector understood this as a primitive resistance towards participation in a monetized exchange, it is evident that the Coomars found the Mahapersaud to be a peculiarly valuable item in this context, because they used to sell

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<sup>7</sup>Such a perception strongly articulated itself in the context of the Paik rebellion when it was found that the tehsildar of Khoordah, a government estate, had severely oppressed the ryots for many years. It was believed by the district officials that it had a significant role to play in exciting the grievances of the inhabitants of that area.

<sup>8</sup>“To Acting Collector, Cuttack, from Secretary to the Board of Revenue”, May 29, 1812, No. 36, *BRP*.

<sup>9</sup>“To Secretary to the Board of Revenue from Acting Collector, Cuttack”, May 29 1812, No. 35, *BRP*.

it regularly. An exchange of pots for Mahapersaud, in my opinion, used to work to their advantage in two ways. Firstly, they had a fixed and monopolised market for their pots, and secondly, by exercising another monopoly over the reception of a culturally valued object, the Mahapersaud, they could turn it into a commercially valuable one. In the relations of power embedded in this exchange, they enjoyed a particularly advantageous position. This, they feared, might be disturbed if they entered, as “ryots” into a typically agrarian power-relation with the farmer.<sup>10</sup>

This was the unclassifiable *singularity* of the exchange between the Coomars and the temple. It is not difficult to imagine that this exchange, unlike a simple and symmetrical dependence often associated with the category of “barter”, entailed the use, by the Coomars, of both goods, in the form of pots, and money, by selling Mahapersaud, in distinctively strategic ways. Entering into a relationship with the “farmer”, the Coomars apprehended, might make them lose their double-edged control over the items of this economy. A clearer view of the specific contours of this exchange is historically irrecoverable.<sup>11</sup> The Coomars were eventually forced to enter into rent-paying relations with the farmer of the mehal. But it is evident that they did not like it, and the panic that was created in the temple by their withdrawal indicated the strength of their position in the power-equation. I have complemented a critical reading of Warde’s analysis, reflecting a form of governmental rationality, with an alternative way of reading the actions of the Coomars. In doing this, while I do not suggest the possibility of reconstructing the Coomars’ actions as a coherent, self-conscious strategy of resistance, I am also not ready to entirely discard a hermeneutic engagement with them.

### **Entanglements and directness**

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<sup>11</sup>In providing this reading, I do not want to indulge in economism by suggesting that the dynamics of the situation necessarily implied that for the Coomars the cultural value of Mahapershaad was entirely reducible to its monopolistic commercial use. But as I have pointed out, from this fragmentary correspondence, the possibilities of other meanings being immanent in this practice of exchange is unfortunately historically irrecoverable. For this reason, I have tried to create a distinct form of “economic” meaning of this exchange, in order to use it as a heuristic tool for an engagement with the Coomars’ action of withdrawal. The economics of this exchange must be understood as a reconstitution of a culturally valuable object into a commercially prized one. This, I believe, will enable at least one critical reading of the power-equations at play.

When Bhuwanee Purshaud, the proprietor of talukas Tulpuda and Juggernautpore fell into arrears of revenue in 1811, C.S. Waring, the collector, argued that it was a *benamee* purchase, and, therefore, the amount should be recovered from his brother Ram Kanoy, the real proprietor. In order to prove his contention, Waring cross-questioned a number of characters who were involved in these talukas in different capacities. These questions tried to establish Ram Kanoy as the real proprietor in terms of his personal involvement in the affairs of the talukas. Waring examined Ruseekchurn Maintee, the tehsildar of taluka Tulpuda, Laloo Maintee, an erstwhile servant of Bhuwanee Purshaud, Kisooree Maintee, who expected to be employed by the two brothers, Nitye Naik, a ryot of Tulpuda, and Sobah Sing, an inhabitant of that area. His queries tried to intercept, in many ways, the real constitution of authority over the administration of the talukas.

Rent, as I have argued in elaborating upon the “political”, was conceived as the primary entry-point into the networks of agrarian power and authority. Quite obviously, therefore, Waring began the process of understanding the nature of authority in this case by asking who was in charge of the collection of rent from the talukas. In answer to this query, Ruseekchurn, the tehsildar, who carried out the collections, said that he “...sent it to Ram Kanoy & received receipts from him.”<sup>12</sup> Nitye Naik, the ryot, noted that it was collected by Ram Kanoy’s servants. Kisooree Maintee pointed out that the Serberakars and Ryots paid revenue to Ramkanoy, and finally Soobah Sing also came up with the same response. While this set of responses seemed to vindicate Waring’s suspicion that Ramkanoy, as the receiver of rent, was the real proprietor of the talukas, answers to other questions left the matter unresolved.

On being asked, “Whom did the Ryots know as the proprietor...”, Ruseekchurn pointed out that, “They took Pottahs from Bhuwanee Purshaud but sent the revenue to Ram Kanoy.”<sup>13</sup> He further remarked that he used to obey the orders of Ramkanoy. Waring, in order to confirm his suspicion about the real seat of authority, wanted to know why he did so, despite being a servant of Bhuwanee Pershaud. In reply, Ruseekchurn argued that although Bhuwanee Pershaud was the real proprietor of the talukas, “Ramkanoy being the elder brother of Bhowaneeoershaud & manager

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<sup>12</sup>“Deposition of Ruseekchurn Maintee, enclosure to a letter to Secretary to the Board of Revenue from Collector, Cuttack”, June 7, 1811, No. 47, *BRP*.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid*.



of all their affairs, I therefore obeyed him.”<sup>14</sup> It is by invoking such a familial domain of authority, marked by brotherhood, trust and mutual cooperation that most of Waring’s respondents maintained both positions—of Bhuwanee Pershaud being the real proprietor, and Ram Kanoy being the key operator in the affairs of the talukas—as mutually consistent.<sup>15</sup> This mode of persuasion also allowed them to agree with Nitye Naik’s (the ryot) statement that the ryots considered Ram Kanoy to be the real proprietor.<sup>16</sup> They seemed to suggest that the ryots falsely understood the person with whom they had immediate and more regular contact, especially in relation to the payment of rent, as the real proprietor. Interestingly, Nitye Naik, the sole spokesman of the ryots, appeared to have reached a different conclusion about the real proprietorship from a perspective similar to the zemindary servants. Even Nitye Naik claimed to know that the talukas were jointly governed due to a familial intimacy between the two brothers. But he reversed the proprietary authority in this familial domain. He remarked, that “Ram Kanoy was the proprietor & Bhowanee Purshaud was his confidential manager.”<sup>17</sup>

Waring’s attempt to pinpoint the real proprietor was not successful. The Board of Revenue, after going through his inquiries, noted that they, “do not consider the Benamy purchase alleged to have been made by Ramkanoy as sufficiently established to enable them to enforce payment from him & they accordingly direct that you confine Bhuwaneepershaud in the Dewanny Jail unless he shall discharge the arrears due from the lands purchased in his name.”<sup>18</sup> Waring’s questions were underpinned by a crucial assumption of the governmental framing of “property”. His insistence on a search for the real proprietor suggested that an effective administration of property would never be possible without identifying the immediate figure of authority in a taluk. As I noted earlier, especially in the chapter on the “village”, that over the first half of the nineteenth century discursive practices of governance privileged directness, as the most authentic form of power on land. Waring’s attempt to prove

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<sup>14</sup>“Re-examination of Ruseekchurn Maintee, enclosure to a letter to Secretary to the Board of Revenue from Collector, Cuttack”, Ibid.

<sup>15</sup>Laloo Maintee, “Ramkanoy is elder brother to Bhuwanee Purshaud and manager of his affairs.” Soobah Singh, “Both of them used the profits as if equally concerned.” “Deposition of Laloo Maintee, inhabitant of Mouza Joytollung Pergunnah Balookissee, enclosure to a letter to Secretary to the Board of Revenue from Collector, Cuttack”, Ibid.

<sup>16</sup>Consider Laloo Maintee’s statements: “Who did the Ryots consider as the real proprietor? Ramkanoy. Do you know if the ryots truly considered Ramkanoy to be the real proprietor? Yes and the Ryots (if called upon) will affirm the same.”, Ibid.

<sup>17</sup>“Deposition of Nitye Naik, ryot, Taluka Tulpuda, Mouza Sodkund”, Ibid.

<sup>18</sup>“To Collector, Cuttack from Secretary to the Board of Revenue”, June 7, 1811, No. 47, *BRP*.

the purchase a benamee one indicated that he perceived the illegality of the matter as a failure to configure the category of property in terms of direct/immediate forms of power on land.

The Board, however, resisted this redefinition. It believed that there was no contradiction in Bhuwanee Pershaud being the formal proprietor, and Ram Kanoy the real manager. Nitye Naik's testimonial, I imagine, could not prove, even in these formalist terms of the Board, the illegality of the purchase. Perhaps the servants' depositions were considered more authentic with regard to the requirements for an essentially formalist definition of proprietorship. I could guess as much that the ryot, was also understood by the Board to be necessarily representative of a simple and short-sighted peasantry, and, therefore, incapable of making a distinction between the formal and the real. Unfortunately, both for Waring and Nitye Naik, the gap between the formal and the real could not be bridged. It showed that, in spite of tendencies towards the reverse, there were instances when the redefinition of the category of property in the image of a directness of power, was interrupted.

In matters of property, there were many more such entanglements. When Kaleesunker Ghose, proprietor of taluk Kishenpur in pergunnah Ankora asked for help from the government in getting possession of certain villages in mouza Govindpur, which he argued was part of his estate, and unjustly withheld by Koonjbeharry Chowdree, the Sudder Dewanny Adawlut rejected his application. The court order noted that, "the disputed villages remain in the possession of the person by whom they were then enjoyed (Koonjbeharry Chowdree) and that Kulee Sunker should be referred to establish his claim by instituting a regular suit."<sup>19</sup> This made the collector report in detail on the settlement of Ankora which was at the root of this dispute.

The collector noted that in the year 1811 taluk Kishenpoor, the property of Koonjbeharry Chowdree was sold for the recovery of arrears of revenue, and purchased by Bhyrubsunker Chowdree and Rajchunder Shome. "Shortly after the purchase," the collector continued, "these persons conceiving they had not received possession of all the lands included in the sale presented a petition... when the assistance usually afforded to purchasers at public sales was applied for to the Zillah court thro' the Government Vakeel, this assistance I believe was not afforded and

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<sup>19</sup>"To Acting Secretary to the Board of Revenue from Acting Collector, Cuttack", June 13, 1815, No. 20, *BRP*.

Bhyrubsunker Chowdree did not obtain possession of the villages.”<sup>20</sup> Next year, they disposed of the property to Kaleesunker Ghose, the present proprietor. But in the matter of acquiring possession of the disputed portions, even he “was no more fortunate than his predecessors.”<sup>21</sup> In the light of these circumstances, the collector argued that Kaleesunker would not be authorized by the existing regulations to acquire the disputed villages unless his claim is supported by a separate suit instituted for the same property by the person from whom he purchased Kishenpoor. The central question to be answered in this entanglement, as the collector put it succinctly, was ““what is Kulee Sunker entitled to as purchaser at private sale of Kishenpoor””<sup>22</sup>

The collector argued that Kalee Sunker cannot be entitled to a property which was sold by a person who never got possession of it, because the seller, in the first place, could not have sold a property without his own claims on it being established. He maintained that “If Kalee Sunker purchased lands by private sale and does not get possession of all, he must look to the vender for remuneration, the vender cannot refer him to Government because he purchased those lands at a Public Sale, it was the duty of the latter during the period he held Kishenpoor to have called upon Government to put him in possession of all the lands and not to have disposed of them before he got possession of all he conceived included in his purchase.”<sup>23</sup> What was it that engendered such complex entanglements out of a simple case of successive transfers of a piece of landed property?

I argue that the complexity was generated by a failure to place the two central principles of “property”, namely, a concreteness of possession, and an abstraction of absolute alienability, in the same person. Kulee Sunker’s property rights never got admitted within the governmental framing of property because he was not considered to possibly have a “property” right in something which he does not “possess”. So the sale/ purchase of a property right in these lands, to begin with, was considered null and void. In this framing of property, property right did not remain only an abstract relation to land, conceived in terms of absolute transferability/alienability of land as a commodity, but rather was made contingent on the supposedly concrete category of possession. The issue of benamee purchase was seen through the lens of the same anxiety, which made the collector search for a real proprietor in Ram Kanoy. But in

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<sup>20</sup>Ibid.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid.

this case, property was refigured in terms of the “concrete”, as Kulee Sunker was allowed to not pay revenue till he possessed the lands. The Court declared that the revenue demand of those disputed villages were to be suspended till Kalee Sunker received possession. The discursive practices of agrarian governance, in framing “property”, did not always necessarily invest in the same person a right of transfer and a right of possession. On the contrary, as I argued in the previous chapters, property was structured as a partial and plural set of rights, relating to both transfer and possession, distributed in varying combinations among a host of figures. Within this framework, in the case of Kalee Sunker, the combination of both rights in the same person was perceived to be a legitimate one, in contradistinction to Kunjbeharry Chowdree, whose possession of the lands was considered an illegitimate right. In the case of Ram Kanoy it was thought that he is the proprietor even if he did not have possession. In Kulee Sunker’s case, however, he was not considered a proprietor because he did not have possession. In the second situation, therefore, we see that the attribute of directness, or immediate presence, determined what “property” meant in the discourse of governance.

Questions of possession, produced by the problematic of the “local”—as concreteness, and directness of power—pervaded the governance of property disputes throughout the first half of the nineteenth century. In the 1840s, a conflict arose over the rent of a certain amount of land in mouza Jutni, pergunnah Khoorda. Seewuck Barick, the rent-payer, argued that in 1806 Pudolab Mahapater executed a kubooleut with the government for 6 battees, 24 ghoonths, 2 biswas of land in mouza Jutni, and held undisturbed possession of it, with his son Minjugdeb, till 1841. Seewuck paid rent for a portion of this land to Pudolab till his death in 1849. After this, he was supposed to pay the rent to his son when Huree Raotra and his brothers claimed the rent. They argued that the land was originally Pudolab’s but after a butwarra in 1836, became theirs. The judge, however, ruled out their claim.

The judge noted that, “It is quite evident that a family dispute existed between the mozahim and the defendants, regarding the right to the land in mouza Jutni since 1836 A.D...and although it is alleged that Pudolab...executed a deed or relinquishment of his right in the 33 batees, 2 mauns and 4 biswas...in Jutni and other mouzas, the document or deed filed in the suit does not altogether bear out the

allegation.”<sup>24</sup> He was more convinced of the absence of any butwarrah, by the fact that the dispute had been brought earlier to the deputy collector who in 1843, that is, seven years after the alleged butwarra had recorded Minjugdeb as the proprietor “in succession to his father, Pudolab...on the grounds of their *ascertained possession*...”<sup>25</sup> From Huree Raotra’s subsequent petition to be put in possession, he also inferred that for all these years he was not in possession of these lands. Once again, it is evident that the issue of possession played a deciding role in judging the authenticity of contending claims to property and rent. Huree Raotra and others presented quite a few documents to establish their proprietary status. This included a kubooleut issued by them in the name of Seewuck Barick, as well as a ladavee showing the butwarra. But actual possession was considered a greater evidence of proprietary status. In the discursive practices of governance, possession became a sign of complete presence, without which the category of property seemed to remain hollow and incomplete.

That is why in 1852 when Brindaban Oopadya claimed property-rights in a portion of land in chuck Sardung, mouza Meerpore, his claims were dismissed, and the lands were settled with Puhlad Das. Brindaban put forward a plaint against the decision of the deputy collector, stating that when in 1838, in execution of a decree against him, some lands in Meerpore were sold, the purchaser Puhlad Das falsely represented that the entire mouza was sold, and managed to get possession on the lands which belonged to him. The moonsiff, however, refused to accept Brindaban’s claim, noting that, “it was fully proved from the evidence of the witnesses examined before the court, and the *pottahs*, *poutees*, and *bisoduns* granted by the zemindar to the defendant from 1246 to 1249...that the defendant had been in possession for upwards of twelve years...”<sup>26</sup> He dismissed the suit on the ground of lapse of time.

Against this decision, Brindaban filed an appeal, further pointing out that he did not appeal earlier, because in 1839 although Puhlad was awarded the value of

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<sup>24</sup>February 11, 1854, No. 62 of 1853, Appeal from the decision of Gourbullub Ghose, Moonsiff of Pooree, dated 30<sup>th</sup> April 1853, Hure Raotra, Gobindhuree, Chundun and Somnath Chotrah, (Defendants,) Appellants, versus Seewuck Barrick, (Plaintiff) Respondent, *Bengal Zillah Courts Decisions*, 1854, Cuttack, 11.

<sup>25</sup>Emphasis mine, Ibid.

<sup>26</sup>September 23, 1852, No. 67 of 1852, Appeal from the decision of Moonshee Gurriboolah, Moonsiff of Balasore, dated 21<sup>st</sup> April 1852, Brindaban Oopadya, (Plaintiff) Appellant, versus, Puhlad Das Mahapater (Defendant) Respondent, *Bengal Zillah Courts Decisions*, 1854, Cuttack, 109.

some fish that Brindaban took from a pond situated in chuck Sardung, this did not prove Puhlad's possession on those lands, as Puhlad's claim to the rent of the lands surrounding the pond was not admitted. The judge admitted that there was a flaw in the sale of these lands. He also noted that the sale could have been cancelled, had the plaintiff applied for a reversal of this decision in time. But in the light of the present circumstances, he argued, that Brindaban "has himself solely and entirely to blame for allowing his property to pass from his hands..."<sup>27</sup> The judge upheld the decision of the moonsiff on the same ground of continuous possession by the defendant for a period of more than twelve years since the property came under dispute, and the plaintiff got dispossessed. Once again, despite the dispute over Puhlad's claim to proprietary rights over the lands around the pond, the merits of possession determined the fate of proprietorship. Even though the government admitted its own mistake in allowing the property right of the disputed lands to slip out of the hands of the true owner, it overruled everything on the basis of what was perceived to be the greatest vindication of property right, namely, the reality of continuous, undisturbed possession for a certain period of time. The disputes discussed in this section, I argue, expressed a growing consensus over the category of "possession" as constitutive of property. These contentions displayed that "property", as a gamut of rights and relations around land had to be continuously recast in the image of a directness of power and presence, which I have described as the problematic of the "local". Governance, here, signified a relentless striving towards full presence.<sup>28</sup> Possession seemed to offer that promise of presence, which was, however, as I will show in the subsequent sections, never guaranteed in that battlefield of power-relations called land.

### **Battles of the Locality**

In the years following the completion of the settlement, incessant battles were fought over control of land in the judicial amphitheatres of Cuttack. Claims to possession of land, in a variety of ways, by a range of landholders flooded the courts in the district. As I demonstrated in the previous chapters, by the time of the settlement in Cuttack, a

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<sup>27</sup>September 23, 1852, No. 67 of 1852, Appeal from the decision of Moonshee Gurriboolah, Moonsiff of Balasore, dated 21<sup>st</sup> April 1852, Brindaban Oopadya, (Plaintiff) Appellant, versus, Puhlad Das Mahapater (Defendant) Respondent, *Bengal Zillah Courts Decisions*, 1854, Cuttack, 110.

map of legitimacy had been established, in which different kinds of possessory and proprietary interests in land were distributed over a number of figures. But despite these emplotments, the design of possession was never stable. It relentlessly churned conflicts between different agrarian groups in the locality. Governmental practices tried to steer through the contestations, and settle the issue of possession according to its calculus of legitimacies, in the process opening up space for newer articulations of the problematic of the “local”.

As I noted earlier, the principles of settlement in Cuttack was informed by a range of debates which took place in different times and at different sites over the nature of the “political” in India. These debates travelled to Cuttack, and got reconfigured in a manner which allowed governmental practices to deal with the major landholders of the district from within the analytical presuppositions of an agrarian structure that had been assembled through these debates. Big landlords like the zemindars and talukdars, as I showed earlier, were clear objects of criticism in this agrarian imaginary. The ryot, in the image of an ancient peasant cultivator, was perceived as the authentic proprietor of the soil. But by the time of the settlement of Cuttack, the emerging figure of the village-proprietor, construed as embodying the traces of the ancient peasant cultivator, was foregrounded as the most privileged figure in the matrix of proprietary rights on land. Quite obviously, these reformulations did not destroy the rights of the old zemindars and talukdars. But, as I will demonstrate in the subsequent sections, they created a new dynamics of power on land. The zemindars and talukdars suddenly found themselves in tough combats with village-proprietors of various sorts. As the rights and interests of the latter got more sharply defined, combined with a critical attitude in administrative circles towards bigger landlords, property and possession in Cuttack started experiencing tremors and settlements of new kinds.

The serberakars and mokuddums of Cuttack, who were identified by the settlement as legitimate holders of various kinds of proprietary privileges became the immediate enemy of the zemindars. Official recognition of their rights made them strong contenders in the dispersed matrix of power on land, and zemindars utilized every opportunity to get rid of these figures from their estates. Such strategies by the zemindars can be read as yet another articulation of the problematic of the “local”, namely, attempts to institute directness as the modality of agrarian power. In other words, the zemindars, through these battles, tried to establish a direct relation of

power with the cultivators, by excluding village-proprietors of different descriptions. The Company's government was trying to achieve the same thing, and so were the various other landholders of the locality. But as I have argued earlier, the twin articulations of the "political" made governmental practices organize the "local" simultaneously as a dispersed field of proprietary relations yet woven around the privileged location of the village-proprietors in that field as the most authentic agents of the "political". The centralizing tendencies inherent in the choice of such a representative figure laid the ground for contending claims of representativeness. Since the zemindars lost their formerly established distinction in this new economy of representativeness, reclamation wars had to begin. Battle lines were drawn in the nineteenth division of Bengal presidency.

The potential for contestations was opened up by a decision of the government passed against the serberakars of Puttamoondie in 1844. As I showed in the fourth chapter, the government had put down a set of criterion for judging the authenticity of the proprietary status of serberakars, mokuddums, and pudhans in Cuttack. In Puttamoondie, the government pointed out that these serberakars cannot claim proprietary rights, because they held land from the zemindars as moostajirs or farmers.<sup>29</sup> This ruling introduced one more type of landholder in the field of agrarian power as another level of distinction against which the authenticity of the proprietary figures of Cuttack had to be established. Moreover, since the figure of the moostajir, or ijaradar, or farmer, embodied both the possibilities of resembling, or being different from, the putatively authentic proprietary figures, it became the rallying point for reclamation strategies on both sides. Henceforth, zemindars always tried to prove that the village-level landholders in their estates were mere farmers, devoid of superior proprietary rights.

The definition of the farmer, therefore, became of crucial importance in these conflicts. The government construed the farmer as a contractual and short-term leaseholder of lands, lacking ancientness, authenticity, and, consequently, legitimate

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<sup>29</sup>"Commissioner, Cuttack to Secretary to the Board of Revenue, July 19, 1844, No. 12, Board of Revenue Proceedings", as cited in Tarun Kumar Mukhopadhyay, *The Agrarian Society of Orissa: Nineteenth Century*, Kolkata, 2008, 37. Mukhopadhyay goes on to argue that, "The zamindars, relying on this precedent, did everything to reduce the *muqaddams* to the position of farmers." But this chapter will show that the same precedent also worked against the zemindars. This was because what Mukhopadhyay presents as his analysis, namely, the strategic use of this precedent by the zemindars, became soon an indispensable part of official perception in Cuttack. Accordingly, whenever this precedent was used by the zemindars in such disputes, the use was seen as necessarily fraudulent by the officials.



proprietary capacities. So if the zemindars could prove that the landholder, whose title was in dispute, held the lands on the basis of varying, short-term “farming kubooleuts”, as they did in Puttamoondie, his claim to a proprietary status was rejected. As I demonstrated in the previous chapters, a vigorous search for ancient and authentic proprietors, who were also imagined to be the most appropriate improvers, marked the discursive practices of agrarian governance in early nineteenth century British India. This was complemented by a distrust of “farmers”, understood as short-term, contractual leaseholders, and, therefore, feared as an extortionist, parasitic presence on land. Unlike Ricardian political-economy, where “farmers” were considered to be agrarian capitalists, agrarian governance in British India construed this figure as an enemy of agricultural improvement. This was particularly evident with reference to the farmers/tehsildars of government estates. During the paik rebellion, the illegitimate collections and generally rapacious conduct of the tehsildar of Khoordah was identified as one of the major grievances of the inhabitants leading to the uprising.

However, the category of the “farmer”, like all other categories of Ricardian political economy, was never entirely discarded. Rather, it was reconfigured, and incorporated within the search for a combination of authentic proprietors and appropriate improvers. That is why, as I noted in the earlier chapters, in describing the meerasidar, Thomas Munro argued that they were the ideal agents of improvement because they combined the capacities of proprietor, farmer, and cultivator. Even in Bengal, in the latter half of the nineteenth century, administrators pointed out that the ryots were farmers, and not mere wage-labourers. It was argued that since they were the authentic proprietors and the cultivators of the soil, they possessed capacities of improvement, like farmers. A senior member of the Board of Revenue, F.J. Halliday, deputed as supervisor of the settlement in Cuttack, argued that thanee ryots of Cuttack possessed attributes of farmers. In a memorandum on the settlements of Cuttack, he insisted that the rent of the thanee ryots should not be fixed, as by doing that they would be mistakenly converted into proprietors, whereas in reality they were merely hereditary farmers. He further noted that, “...in order to avoid trenching upon profits and wages which we are of course utterly unable to define and which after all may often be infringed we are obliged to exceed the other way and trench upon rent. But a farmer who receives in addition to wages and profits, a share of the rent is pro tanto a proprietor, which the Thanees do not claim to be.” Halliday believed that, “The

Thanee Ryots are resident farmers who have become hereditary merely as it appears to me from the tendency which every title in India has to become hereditary.”<sup>30</sup>

Andrew Sartori has recently argued that in the debates surrounding the Bengal Rent Act of 1859, ryots, or peasant cultivators, were viewed as capitalist improvers.<sup>31</sup> Sartori points out that the deployment of the category of custom in this context was a political-economic one, as the categorization of the ryot as a proprietor and an improver, was considered to be rooted in the ryot’s productive function of mixing labor with the soil, and all of this was understood to be based on “custom”. It is evident from Sartori’s argument that in this debate, the ryot was classified as both farmer and proprietor. But in Cuttack, the “farmer” was differently imagined. Although Halliday represented the ryot as a farmer, he insisted upon its difference from a proprietor. This distinction was maintained even in the disputes in Cuttack between zemindars and mokuddums, which crucially revolved around the figure of the farmer. In these disputes, once again, the farmer was perceived as a contractual improver, different from, and inferior than improving agents like the village-level landholders who were also ancient proprietors.

The figure of the farmer, in Sartori’s analysis of custom, remains within the framework of classical political economy. However, I argue that the classificatory framework of property which was assembled across multiple sites in early nineteenth century British India, represented the farmer in terms of certain radical reconfigurations of classical political-economic categories. In a reconfigured state it was neither a combination of Lockean and Ricardian categories, as Sartori understands it, nor could it cling to a more classically Ricardian identity.

Negative predispositions towards the figure of the contractual farmer structured the strategic reinvention of the figure in Cuttack in a number of disputes between the zemindars and various village-level landholders. In five mouzas of taluk Pandua, Dwarkanath Tagore, the zemindar, managed to prove that the landholders in his estate claiming to be hereditary mokuddums, were mere ijaradars. The decision against the proprietary claims of these landholders was based on the evidence of their

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<sup>30</sup>“Memorandum on Khureedgee Putna Buheepore, Pergunnah Kowul Kund, Zillah Cuttack, Settling Officer, Mr. Taylor”, Copies of Memoranda on certain Settlements in Bauleah, Cuttack, Chittagong and Murshidabad Divisions by Mr. F.J. Halliday, Secretary to the Board of Revenue, Deputed to Settlement work, 1837-1838, *SBOR—Settlement Proceedings*.

<sup>31</sup>Andrew Sartori, “A Liberal Discourse of Custom in Colonial Bengal” *Past and Present*, No. 212, August 2011, 163-97.

having exchanged farming kubooleuts of varying rents with the zemindar.<sup>32</sup> The claim to a surburakaree title over some mouzas in taluk Kishenpoorah was challenged by zemindar Juggernath Pershad Mullick on the same ground. Although the deputy collector, collector, and commissioner upheld the rights of the surburakar, the Board of Revenue overruled their decision. The secretary to the Board noted that, “The claims of all the middlemen in the Kishenpoorah Taluk were...rejected by me, on the grounds that they had held as mere managers for a long period on lease periodically renewed.”<sup>33</sup> As it is evident, this judgment was based on a prevalent perception which construed these village-level landholders as contractual “managers” and wasteful “middlemen”. As I noted in an earlier chapter, amongst the officials in Cuttack, Henry Ricketts was a strong proponent of this view. This perception was rooted in a classical political-economic assumption which envisaged a direct, unimpeded relationship between big landlords or zemindars and small cultivators or ryots as particularly advantageous for agricultural “improvement”. It reflected, once again, an urge to establish unencumbered forms of power on land. But the design of directness it had to offer contained a specific equation of power, or a defined set of relationships, which could be instituted only by dislodging other sets. The articulation of the “local” opposed to it upheld a different relational calculus between a range of landholders, privileging the rights of serberakars, mokuddums and pudhans. Even this was an articulation of the same logic of directness; but it wanted to locate agrarian power within a different design. These were, therefore, conflicts over different claims of directness—one voiced by the zamindars, which labelled the village-level landholders as illegitimate encroachers, short-term “farmers”, or “middlemen” between zemindars and ryots, and the other by the village-proprietors, who presented themselves as authentic proprietors, thereby claiming direct control and possession of lands.

Several village-level landholders were denied the status of authentic proprietors in Cuttack. Tarun Mukhopadhyay argues that the Puttamoondie judgment served an important point of reference in most of these disputes. In the dispute over mokuddumi rights in mouza Danpore, Mukhopadhyay notes that “In his petition Radhamadhub quoted the decision in the Puttamoondie case. On consideration of the

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<sup>32</sup>“Extract from the Commissioner’s Proceedings in the Settlement Department, March 18, 1845, No. 8, Board of Revenue Proceedings”, as cited in Mukhopadhyay, *The Agrarian Society of Orissa*, 38.

<sup>33</sup>“To Secretary to the Board of Revenue from Commissioner, Cuttack”, September 2, 1845, No. 36, *SBORP*.

case the government rejected the claim to the mokuddumi right over the mouza...<sup>34</sup> The same strategy was adopted by the zemindar of Boorapara and Noapara. Referring to the Board's order in the case of Puttamoondée he argued against the mokuddumi claims in his estates. He tried to prove that these landholders were mere farmers, and was successful in his attempt. Invoking a number of such instances, Mukhopadhyay concludes that there was a generalized dispossession of such village-level landholders in Cuttack in the years after the settlement. On this point, I disagree with him. It is evident that in a number of such disputes the village-level landholders lost the battles with the zemindars. But they also won their rights in a considerable number of instances, which I am going to discuss in the next section. However, the more important point is that the exact number of victories and losses cannot be pinpointed. This is where, I believe, Mukhopadhyay misunderstands the significance of these battles.<sup>35</sup> Mukhopadhyay's conclusions can be contradicted statistically as well. Sakti Padhi, after a close statistical scrutiny of the tenancy structure of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century Orissa, argues that "...what we do find in the end is that the sub-proprietors as a group were very much able to hold on to their own: they maintained their share in the total gross rental as well as their area share in the total assessed area. Moreover, they increased their share in the gross rental that they were collecting, (from 20.2 per cent to 32 per cent between 1837 and 1897) and continued to get the same preferential treatment vis-à-vis the zemindars in the 1927 settlement—they were pocketing 32.1 per cent of the rent they were collecting, as compared to 15.4 per cent going to the zemindars."

The growing number of these disputes in the years following the settlement shows that the settlement, by redefining the relationships between zemindars and village-level landholders, set them up as the primary domain for contests over agrarian power in the locality. As I have demonstrated earlier, the recasting of these relationships was structured by a preference for village-level landholders over big landlords. Although the Puttamoondée verdict can be taken as exemplifying a contrary tendency, a closer look at more disputes will reveal that a generalized critical disposition towards zemindars in the administrative circles outweighed the benefits they derived from it. As the practice adopted by zemindars of using kubooleuts of

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<sup>34</sup>Mukhopadhyay, *The Agrarian Society of Orissa*, 38.

<sup>35</sup>Sakti Padhi, *Land Relations and Agrarian Development in India: A Comparative Historical Study of Regional Variations*, Thiruvananthapuram, 1999, 107-8.

varying rents as evidence to turn the distinction between “farmers” and “proprietors” to their favour got regularized, administrators soon identified a potential for fraudulence in it. In this manner the Puttamoondie case very easily got reinterpreted in negative terms for the zemindars. It was understood by administrators to have implanted in the structure of legislation a strong potential for deceit; a precedent which they believed necessarily lend itself to inappropriate and false uses.

This reinterpretation of the Puttamoondie verdict came out clearly even in situations where mokuddumi claims were eventually dismissed by the administrative apparatus. In Booraparah and Noaparah, the Commissioner pointed out that, “The claim to hold these villages as mokuddumi was admitted by the settling officer, the Collector, and by myself in appeal. The zemindar’s plea, of the mokuddum having entered into engagements with him as farmer was overruled, because there is strong reason to believe, that the mokuddums were inveigled into the execution of these engagements. The zemindar recognized their title, as mokuddum, from the time he purchased the property in 1219 until 1246 when having become acquainted with the Board’s orders, in the case of the Pattamoondie estate, ruling, that the execution of farming documents nullified summary cognizance of mokuddumee claims, he got these mokuddums to style themselves as farmers.”<sup>36</sup>

Although, as I mentioned earlier, the vindication of these claims by the district officials was overruled by the Board, apprehensions about cunning zemindars remained deeply entrenched in the various echelons of governance. As my argument in earlier chapters bring out, it had to be this way, because by this time the zemindars had lost the guarantee of a privileged position in the changing matrix of agrarian power. The time was ripe, and the field had been opened up for new participants. It is evident therefore, that the issue of directness of power, or concrete possession of, and thereby, effective control over lands set the context for contentions over the nature of proprietary power, or the specific, “local” articulation of the “political” of India. These contentions clearly suggest that the official framing of the problematic of immediacy, or directness of power, as the key object of governance, gradually came to be shared by all other actors as the defining feature of power struggles in a locality. This section has shown that while zemindars, by putting forward their own justification of authentic immediacy, won some of these battles, there was an

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<sup>36</sup>“To Secretary to the Board of Revenue, from Commissioner, Cuttack”, January 10, 1845, No. 20, *SBORP*.

emergent governmental disposition in Cuttack, which turned the tables against them in greater number of situations.

### **Leaders of the Locality**

The same Radhamadhub Banerjee, zemindar of taluk Kistopore, who managed to disenfranchise Markund Pundah from his claim to mokuddumi rights in mouza Danpore, was caught up in a more complex state of affairs in the dispute over the mokuddumi rights of mouza Joomrah. In this case, the different levels of the administrative apparatus seemed to be in absolute disagreement with each other. The moonsiff dismissed the mokuddumi claims, the collector reversed the moonsiff's decree, the commissioner reaffirmed the moonsiff's decision, the senior member of the Board of Revenue thought that mokuddumi rights should not be upheld, while the junior member was convinced that these rights were well-established. I do not know what finally happened to the case, as it was sent to the Government of Bengal for the ultimate judgment. But what strikes as more revealing to me than the finality, is the radical potential of difference embedded in disputes of this kind, which were shaping the question of agrarian power in the locality in sharply polarized terms.

When mouza Joomrah came under settlement, Jankeebullubh Ray put forward his claims to the mokuddumi of the mouza to the deputy collector. The deputy collector admitted his claims, and submitted his case for the orders of the collector. The collector, Mr. Mackintosh, dismissed these claims on the basis of certain kubooleuts which had been taken at varying jummas for the mouza. The commissioner cancelled the collector's order, confirming Jankeebullubh's claims, arguing that the mouza was purchased as a mokuddumi in 1834 by the latter. Baboo Radhamadhub Banerjee appealed against this decision saying that he had "always received Izardary Kabooleuts for the mouzas comprised in it."<sup>37</sup> He also pointed out that the above-mentioned sale was a mistake on the part of the civil court, as the sellers in question were mere Izaradars. He further argued that the erstwhile zemindars of this taluk were its only proprietors, which can be inferred from the fact that they granted lakhiraj lands in the mouzas. As I noted in the fourth chapter, the right to grant lakhiraj lands was considered as one of the most authentic markers of

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<sup>37</sup>"To Secretary to Government, Revenue Department, from Secretary to the Board of Revenue", June 10, 1845, No. 21, *SBORP*.

proprietary rights by the government during the settlement of Cuttack. This right was evaluated primarily with regard to the issue of the proprietary privileges of the village-level landlords like serberakars, mokuddums, and pudhans. But as it is evident, in this renewed context of contests, they were strategically used by zemindars as well. This shows, once again, that the zemindars' proprietary status was no longer guaranteed. It had to be wrenched out from a number of oppositional claims.

The zemindars, especially the absentee ones, in the context of a generalized preference for *direct* forms of agrarian power, had lost their credibility amongst administrators as well. Responding to Radhamadhub's appeal commissioner Mills noted that "The petitioner is a non-resident proprietor and like all of this class, in the Province of Cuttack refuses to acknowledge...the Mokuddumi tenure, it has been the uniform policy of these zemindars to reduce the mokuddums to the situation of farmers...Dwarkanath Tagore, and other influential zemindars, have in order to attain this object goaded the mokuddums to enter into farming engagements. This practice has been more particularly followed since the Board's orders in regard to the Serberakars of Patamoondie were passed...and the zemindar relying on this precedent have left no means untried, to make their mokuddums hold from them as farmers."<sup>38</sup> The logic of agrarian governance in this period was such that it pretty obviously enabled a precedent like that of Puttamoondie to be turned against the zemindars. Mills argued that the mere execution of a farming kubooleut should not be treated as adequate proof of the illegitimacy of claims to a superior proprietary status of village-level landholders in relation to the zemindars. Instead, he pointed out that, "Each case must of course be decided on its merits but as many appeals of this kind will, if the present are successful be preferred, I may add, that I have looked on all Moostajiri Pottahs, which purport to have been executed subsequent to the Board's orders on the Puttamoondie settlement, with much distrust and suspicion, and it is of great importance, to the protection of the mokuddum's right, that the point should receive serious consideration."<sup>39</sup>

It is, in my opinion, not the general and abstract sense of the irreducible individuality of each case, declared to be inherent in the constitution of law, which generated the possibility for such radical differences in opinion over disputes of this kind. On the contrary, it is the particular and concrete set of preferences for either big

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<sup>38</sup>Ibid.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid.

landlords or village-level landholders, expressed in the strategic reinvention of the figure of the farmer that determined the apparent dynamism of the legal field. As I will show in this section, such dynamism became the mark of these disputes in Cuttack. But this dynamism became generalized, due to a particular set of oppositions produced out of the structural logic of an agrarian imaginary. The dynamism was immanent to, and constituted by the structural logic. It did not reflect singularities of the disputes in question.

Admitting Junkeebullubh's statement about the purchase of the mouza as a mokuddumi to be true, the senior member of the Board argued that a settlement of the mouza was subsequently concluded as a moostajiri by the mutual consent of both parties. He pointed out that Junkeebullubh voluntarily executed moostajiri qubooleuts in 1840 and 1841. Mr. Lowis, junior member of the Board argued in favour of the mokuddumi rights on the basis of a number of points. He noted that the mouza was entered as a mokuddumi in the papers of the record-keeper of the Maratha government, Gopal Pundit, which certified the ancientness of the title. He further noted that moostajiri tenures are not saleable, yet this mouza was sold at a public auction. Responding to the senior member's primary area of contention, Lowis pointed out that the voluntariness of Junkeebullubh in the execution of the farming kubooleuts is by no means established. He maintained that "the voluntary execution....besides being denied by the respondent is open to suspicion as having been given or invented after the orders in the Patamoondee settlement had set the ingenuity of all the zemindars in the province at work to destroy the undertenures in their respective zemindaries..."<sup>40</sup> It is clear that the legal ground for settling such disputes, between zemindars and village-level landholders, revolved around the category of the "farmer", which had been defined in a particular manner in the Puttamoondee case. Quite obviously, advocates of both zemindari and mokuddumi rights had to work their way around this precedent. Since the potential for disagreements got entirely structured by the precedent, a deeply entrenched scepticism towards zemindars always allowed a pro-zemindar argument to be reinterpreted as a falsity inherent in the precedent. That is why, as I will elaborate, in almost all such disputes, facts presented in favour of the zemindars were understood to be already tinged with untruth and deceit. Thus, questions of truth and falsity in the

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<sup>40</sup>Ibid.



assessment of evidence was pre-figured in a particular manner by the structural logic of an agrarian imaginary, which had already classified village-level landholders as the most appropriate agent of property, power and “improvement”.

Preferences for village-level landholders were so strong that practices of governance even invented new grounds of legitimacy, or redefined old ones, in order to establish the rights of these figures. In 1847, a dispute arose over the proprietary rights of mouza Koorkora and its under-tenure Kureempoore, part of taluk Randeah in Balasore. Gopeenath Dukhin Rae and others claimed these lands as their mokuddumi. Zemindar Anund Ballab Rae Mahashoy argued that they held the lands as mere farmers. In defense of his contention, the zemindar noted that the claims of the rival party were inconsistent. The evidence showed that when the taluk came under settlement in 1842 Gopeenath and others had claimed these lands first as mokuddums, then as serberakars, and finally again as mokuddums. The district officials were, however, convinced of the authenticity of their mokuddumi rights. As an appeal was put forward against these decisions in the civil court, the sudder ameen upheld the serberakary right of the defendants, dismissing their claims to a mokuddumi status. Against this decision both parties appealed, maintaining their respective original positions.

Gopeenath and others denied ever having executed farming kubooleuts. They claimed to have held possession of mouza Koorkora as mouroosee mokuddums since 1658 A.D., when it was granted to their ancestor Ramchunder Jenna, together with the title of Dukheen Rae, by the Rajah of Orissa. Kurreempore, they argued, was subsequently purchased. They further remarked that, “although it was true that they first claimed the right of possession as mokuddums, and afterwards as serberakars before the settlement officer, they were inveigled into doing so by the plaintiff, and when they discovered that he was endeavouring to deprive them of all title to the lands, they resolved on urging their original and genuine claim as mokuddums.”<sup>41</sup> Once again the zemindar’s assertions were presented as a general untruth, reflecting a standard strategy of deceit. This had become an accepted wisdom, which is why the

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<sup>41</sup>March 28, 1849, No. 8 of 1847, Appeal from the decision of Moulvee Mahomed Farookh, late Sudder Ameen of Balasore, dated the 30<sup>th</sup> August 1847, Gopeenath Dukhin Rae and others, (Defendants) Appellants, Versus Anund Bullub Rae Mahasoy (Plaintiff) Respondent, *Bengal Zillah Courts Decisions*, Cuttack, 1849, 25.

district judge also accepted it as “self-evident”<sup>42</sup>. But the judge ruled in favour of the mokuddumi claim on the basis of a number of other kinds of evidence. He traced the ancientness of the title from a variety of documents. These were a farakhuttee, executed in 1766 by Neeladhury Jena, described as one of the shareholders who relinquished his rights in the mokuddumi in favour of Radha Churn Dakhin Rae, which bore the seals of both the pergunnah cazee and the zemindar, a sunud, drawn by Joogul Kishore Ray Mohasoy, one of the former zemindars, in the name of Nursing Jena, a talpotro pottah granted in 1804 by Kishen Pershaud Ray Mohasoy, and the copy of Gopal Pundit’s jumma-wasil-bakee papers. The judge noted that all these documents, “...were filed before the settlement officer, and in all of them the ancestors of the applicants are styled *mokuddums*...”<sup>43</sup> To this list, he also added a hookumnamah, issued by the ancestors of the mokuddums, conjointly with other local landlords and officers of the pergunnah, like the chowdree, canoongoe, and the gomashah, declaring the grant of certain rent-free lands for the worship of village idols and maintenance of fakeers and Brahmins.

Interestingly, the proprietary claim of the mokuddums in this case was granted, but its legitimacy was derived from a framework of the “political” which did not match the “political” of Cuttack that had been assembled over a number of sites in the earlier decades of governance. As it was highlighted in the fourth chapter, the mokuddums and pudhans of Cuttack were considered to be ancient proprietors of the soil. During the Paik rebellion, when these tenures were put to a rigorous scrutiny, it was argued that they “were the only class besides the sovereign who could claim a proprietary right in the soil...and...no middleman had anciently a right to intervene between them and the Government...”<sup>44</sup> In these investigations, pudhans, or the village-level landholders found in the district of Khoordah, were considered to be representative of the most ancient form of proprietors of land. As Khoordah was the seat of the ancient Hindu Rajah of Orissa, it was inferred that pudhans got their proprietary titles from the ancient sovereign. It was further inferred that the mokuddums of the Moghulbundi, or the area which later came to be ruled by the Mughals, originally resembled the pudhans, in being ancient proprietors of land. Following a similar logic, when Andrew Sterling outlined a property-map for Cuttack,

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<sup>42</sup>Ibid, 27.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid, 26.

<sup>44</sup>“Report of Walter Ewer, 18<sup>th</sup> April, 1818”, *Revenue Proceedings Relative to the Late Disturbances in Cuttack*, Vol. 2, Examiner’s Office, 1819, IOR.

he noted that the Mughal administration merely replaced the Oria names of these ancient proprietors with Persian ones, designating them as mokuddums, chowdrees and canoongoes.

Although Stirling maintained that he could not find definitive proof of the existence of proprietary rights in the soil amongst these tenures, he surely identified a proprietary right in their offices, by virtue of which they controlled sale and purchase of lands in the district. Interestingly, all these genealogies of property in Cuttack, and subsequent ones, which were drawn up during the settlement, identified these village-level landholders as ancient proprietors, who derived their proprietary titles from the ancient sovereign of Orissa. The mokuddums of mouza Koorkoorah seemed to confirm this classification by arguing that their title was acquired from the sovereign. But the judge upheld their title on the basis of evidence which established that the title was conferred by zemindars. As I noted in the earlier chapters, in the classificatory scheme of ancientness, zemindars were considered to be mere tax-collectors, and corrupt, recent outcrops, in contradistinction to the village-level landholders as the original proprietors of land. But in this case, the proprietary status of the mokuddums of Koorkoorah was vindicated by proof of recognition granted by the zemindars. This shows that a preference for these tenures had become deeply embedded in practices of governance, and they often redefined established classifications to uphold it.

Such village-level tenures were admitted even in situations where they could not be defined in terms of any of the available categories. In 1846, a dispute emerged over a lease of mouza Saontrapore granted by Maharajah Ramchunder Deo, who at that time held the title of the ancient Rajah of Orissa, and also acted as the superintendent of the temple of Juggernaut. It was supposed to be a farming lease for 12 years, granted to Lalla Pursooram Rai. Lalla argued that as soon as he had collected a portion of the rents, Permessur Podhan, the zemindar, through whom the rents were realized previously, drove away the person he had deputed for collections.

Permessur and others claimed that the Raja had no right to grant the lease to anyone. Further, they argued that the right to collect rents from the mouza belonged to them, as they held possession of it through their ancestors from time immemorial. The principal sudder ameen dismissed these contentions. He noted that in a different case, Permessur's serberakary claims to Saontrapore had been rejected by the government, as the mehal in question was defined as government property, with the Rajah as its superintendent. The titles involved in this case lacked any clear definition. While

Lalla described Permessur as a zemindar and himself as a farmer, Permessur claimed to be the surburakar of the mouza, and argued that his title was independent of the Rajah's will. Permessur and others argued that when the Mahrattas granted the mehal for the support of the idol they paid their rent to the temple authorities. Later, when it was transferred to the British government, and the Raja was appointed as the superintendent, they paid annually to him. Unlike the previous case, here it can be seen that village-level tenures often denied their dependence on the will of the sovereign. Permessur and others maintained that their right to the collections from the mouza surpassed the official recognition of any particular government. Eventually the district judge upheld their rights, but still he could not name the tenure.

He noted that it is not clear whether "whether they are to be viewed in the light of mokuddums, serberakars, or farmers..."<sup>45</sup> However, on the basis of documentary proof of their undisturbed possession since the time of the Mahrattas, they were granted a prescriptive right which was "...superior to that of *khloodkasht* or *thaneer* ryuts, though they may not possess a proprietary or transferable right in the mouza...so long as they continue to pay the customary or proper rent, the rajah...has no power to oust them or to farm the mouza to any other party...And although the appellants hold no pottah or certificate, either defining the nature of their tenure, or showing that they are entitled to possession at a fixed jumma, the non-possession of such a document can in no way prejudice their claim to possession..."<sup>46</sup> It is evident from this case that the government in order to maintain all forms of ancient village-level tenures, did not mind reconfiguring the established classificatory frames, or, at times, even discarding them. It seemed to be not even important to be able to define the tenure according to established categories, as long as its ancientness was established.

There were many more directions in which such redefinitions went. Quotidian practices of governance even challenged the central premise of differentiation between village-level proprietary tenures and contractual farming ones. In 1847 Hurree Naik petitioned the district court claiming mouza Neelconna in taluk Bulbhudderpore as his hereditary mokuddumi. The defendants were Rajnarain

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<sup>45</sup>April 13, 1849, No. 10 of 1848, Appeal from the decision of Tarrakaunth Bidyasagur, Principal Sudder Ameen of Cuttack, dated 12<sup>th</sup> August 1848, Permessur Prodhan, Sheeb Prodhan, and Achoot Prodhan, (Defendants,) and Koortebas Prodhan, (Mozahim,) Appellant, Versus Lalla Pursooram Rai, (Plaintiff,) Respondent, *Bengal Zillah Courts Decisions*, Cuttack, 1849, 39.

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid*, 40.

Chowdree, who had purchased half of the taluk, and other zemeendars, namely Kasseenath Chowdree, Rughoonath Chowdree, and Koontilla Dey, who had mortgaged the other half to Rajnarain. They simply stated that the plaintiff was merely a farmer. They based their assertions on the jummaabundee accounts of the mouza of 1804, where it was entered as the *ijarah* of Bhagut Maintee, some moostajiree kubooleuts said to have been executed by the plaintiff in favour of the zemeendar from 1831-33, and an *ikrarnamah* of 1827, on account of an arrear of rent, which was supposedly signed by the plaintiff as a moostajir.

The district judge upheld the mokuddumi rights on the basis of a host of documents, issued at different times by different authorities of the locality, which endorsed the mokuddumi title. But more importantly, the judge did not dismiss the validity of the farming kubooleuts that the zemindars had presented in defense of their claim. Rather, he argued that, “the execution of such *kubooleuts* even if they were all genuine...cannot be considered as a relinquishment on the part of the plaintiff of his mokuddumi claim...”<sup>47</sup> The mokuddumi title, he thought, had been sufficiently established by other documents. He also pointed out that, “If it had been satisfactorily shown by the defendants, that the line of succession had been interrupted, or that the mouza had ever entirely lapsed from the hands of the plaintiff’s family, and that on recovering possession, they executed farming kubooleuts, the case would be different...it has been satisfactorily proved that the plaintiff and his ancestors have been in undisturbed possession...in my opinion amply refutes the defendant’s assertion that the plaintiff was only a farmer or tenant at will...”<sup>48</sup> Interestingly, what we see here is that the earlier form of critical engagement with these disputes, which was structured primarily in terms of a perceived falsity, or possibility of deceit, inherent in the problem, had changed into an outright reinterpretation of the problem, based on the rejection of the central premise of distinction between “farmers” and “mokuddums”, namely, the short-term kubooleuts. Many more documents, belonging to periods of both pre-British and British governments, were considered authentic markers of mokuddumi titles. These were supported by proof of undisturbed possession.

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<sup>47</sup>January 15, 1850, No. 15 of 1849, Appeal from the decision of Tarakanth Bidya Sagur, Principal Sudder Ameen of Cuttack, dated 29<sup>th</sup> December 1848, Hurry Naik, (Plaintiff) Appellant versus Rajnarain Rai Chowdree, Kassenath Das Chowdree, Rugoonth Chowdree, and Musst. Koontilla Dey, widow of Somnath Chowdree, deceased (Defendants) Respondents, *Bengal Zillah Courts Decisions*, Cuttack, 1850, 3.

<sup>48</sup>*Ibid*, 4.

But there was hardly a consensus over documents as well. It has been noted earlier that the papers of Gopal Pundit, the central authority of revenue accounts from the Maratha period, was used in most of these disputes to prove the ancientness of mokuddumis.<sup>49</sup> However, when this ubiquitous standard of authenticity was used by zemindars against mokuddumi claims, it got challenged. In 1849, Sheeb Churn Saontra and Gobind Churn Saontra petitioned the district court, stating that mouza Juggernathpore in taluk Mobarackpore, Balasore, was their mouroosee mokuddumi. Oordhub Churn Das and Unoopram Mhaintee based their opposition to this claim, amongst other documents, on Gopal Pundit's papers where the mouza was allegedly recorded as paikasht. The judge upheld the mokuddumi claim, after examining and challenging all the documents presented against it. With regard to Gopal Pundit's papers, he noted that, "that the said accounts are not only unauthenticated by any signature whatever, but it is well known that abuses of various kinds have been practised with respect to them..."<sup>50</sup> He noted that these papers have been accepted as important testimonials in disputes over ancient tenures, but only when supplemented by other corroborative evidence. In my opinion, such a critical perspective on these papers was somewhere tied to the fact that in the present instance they were being used against mokuddums. It is true that in other disputes as well these papers were never taken to be a definitive proof of the ancientness of a village-level proprietary right. But at the same time, they were not submitted to any kind of critical scrutiny where they were used in favour of mokuddumi claims. It is evident that a highly favourable attitude towards such village-level landholders had become embedded in the discursive practices of governance. It will be interesting to see where such landholders were placed, and how they stylized themselves with reference to the classificatory framework of proprietary rights that got structured over various sites, in and out of Cuttack, in the first half of the nineteenth century. We will take a quick look at that in the next section, before developing a critical perspective on the

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<sup>49</sup>For one amongst many cases where gopal pundit's papers were used as a definitive authority in vindicating moquddumee status, see, December 14, 1849, No. 14 of 1849, Appeal from the decision of Tarakanth Bidyasagur, Principal Sudder Ameen of Cuttack, dated 22<sup>nd</sup> December 1848, Hoorsee Swain and six others, paupers, (Plaintiffs,) Appellants, versus Rajnarain Chowdry, Rughoonath Chowdry, Kasseenath Das, and Musst. Koontilla Dey, (Defendants,) Respondents, *Bengal Zillah Courts Decisions*, 1849.

<sup>50</sup>April 19, 1850, No. 3 of 1850, Appeal from the decision of Munshee Gureeboollah, Sudder Ameen of Balasore, dated 15<sup>th</sup> June 1849, Sheeb Churn Saontra Mahapater, (one of the Defendants,) Appellant, versus Oordhub Churn Das, Unoopram Mhaintee, and Puddum Lochun Mundal (Plaintiffs,) Respondents, *Bengal Zillah Courts Decisions*, Cuttack, 1850, 76.

historiographical treatment of the category of “under-tenures” or “intermediaries”, as it emerges from these discussions.

### **Dependent locations: moving back and forth between generalizations and localizations**

It is evident from the discussion in this chapter that village-level landholders, like mokuddums, serberakars and pudhans, fought for an independent proprietary status vis-à-vis the zemindars in these disputes. I have argued that their assertions were admitted by the government, as the prevailing classificatory frame of property defined them as both legitimate and appropriate proprietors, in contradistinction to zemindars, who were seen as inauthentic proprietors and wasteful landholders. But this did not engender a radical removal of the zemindar from the shared matrix of proprietary-rights on land. Practices of agrarian governance, in tune with the dispersed framing of the “political”, maintained an entire web of proprietary rights on land, while significantly redefining the position of the village-level landholders in it. There were, however, limits to this redefinition. The superiority of village-level tenures was crucially circumscribed by points at which they remained dependent on zemindars. As and when these boundaries were drawn, the juridical category of “under-tenures” was used to describe, in a comparative mode, the village-level tenures of Cuttack. I have shown in one of the earlier chapters that tenures specific to a locality were always necessarily debated and defined in a comparative register, which enabled the category of property to be assembled out of concurrent localizations. In this section I will show that, in the same vein, the village-level tenures of Cuttack were often recast in the light of another comparative field, which was that of “intermediaries” and “under-tenures” in Bengal.

In 1849, Narain Mahapater claimed Rs. 51 as rent of a portion of land situated in mouza Irda, taluk Gujrapore, from Mahadeb Das. Narain argued that Mahadeb cultivated the land as a pahee ryot, and had not paid rent for three years. In response, Mahadeb denied that he was a pahee ryot, stating that the taluk was his zemindaree. He further pointed out that Irda was a mokuddumi mouza belonging to Kirpasindoo Swain and others, who granted him, on payment of Rs. 15, an istemraree pottah (by which a land can be held at a fixed rent) for 5 mauns of land in the mouza, at an

annual jumma of 1 Rupee.<sup>51</sup> While the moonsiff of Cuttack rejected the evidence in favor of the istemrree pottah, the district judge accepted it, dismissing Narain's claim. Narain appealed to the Sudder Dewanny Adawlut, arguing that since he had purchased the mokudumee of Kirpasindhoo Swain which was sold for arrears of rent, the istemrree tenure was no longer valid. As the case came back to the district court for a re-trial, the judge upheld Narain's appeal, declaring that the istemrree pottah had become void by the sale of the mokudumee. He noted that, "Although it is no where, that I am aware of, definitely laid down, that sales held in execution of decrees for arrears of rent, under Regulation VIII of 1831, are to have the same effect with regard to the cancelment of all leases or under tenures created by the defaulting tenant, as sales for arrears of Government revenue held under Act I, 1845, I am of opinion that with reference to the provisions of Regulation VIII of 1819, which declares that in the event of a sale of a *putnee taluk* for arrears of rent, all such incumbrances, the acts of the defaulters, become cancelled..."<sup>52</sup>

It is evident that the decision was arrived at by comparing mokuddumis of Cuttack with putnee taluks of Bengal. However, the judge also admitted that such a comparison was difficult to make because "*mokuddumi*...is a superior kind of tenure to that of a *putnee taluk*, inasmuch that the zemindars themselves possess the power of creating *putnee* tenures, and they possess no such power with regard to *mokuddumis*..."<sup>53</sup> This is precisely how the force of comparison operated in the governance of property. The comparative analytic was such that it enabled generalizations, despite localizations. That is why, although Cuttack mokuddums were considered different from Bengal putneedars, their proprietary capacities were ultimately circumscribed in the light of similarities with the latter.

In positing the distinction between mokuddums and putnidars, the judge also commented on the mode in which these two "under-tenures" were related to

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<sup>51</sup>April 2, 1850, No. 7 of 1850, Appeal from the decision of Shibpersaud Singh, Moonsiff of Cuttack, dated 13<sup>th</sup> December 1849, Chowdry Mahadeb Das (Defendant,) Appellant, versus Chowdry Narain Mahapater, (Plaintiff,) Appellant, *Bengal Zillah Courts Decisions*, Cuttack, 1850, 63-4. It is clear that the same concern, namely, directness of power, which was at the heart of the British governance of property, is shared by the landholders of the locality, and is evident in the act of the zemindar cultivating lands of his own taluk on an Istemrree Pottah taken from mokuddums. The rest of the chapter will show how this concern fundamentally determined the relation of every agrarian group with property.

<sup>52</sup>January 28, 1851, No. 7 of 1850, Appeal from a decision of Sheebpersaud Singh, Moonsiff of Cuttack, dated 13<sup>th</sup> December 1849, Chowdry Mahadeb Das, (Defendant,) Appellant, versus Chowdry Narain Mahapater, (Plaintiff,) Respondent, *Bengal Zillah Courts Decisions*, Cuttack, 1851, 13.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid.



zemindars. He emphasized that mokuddumees, unlike putnee taluks, cannot be created by zemindars. But in his judgment, he assessed the mokuddumi as an “under-tenure”, or a dependent tenure, similar to a putni taluk which, therefore, did not have the right to create further tenures. The structure of dependence between mokuddumis/serberakaris and zemindaris got elaborated over a range of disputes in Cuttack. For example, when Kuroonee Jenna wanted to sell a portion of his mouroosee serberakari tenure, the judge remarked that he had a right to do so irrespective of the zemindar’s consent.<sup>54</sup> Bhugwan Rai Singh argued that when Pudlab Senapatty and others, mokuddums in his estate failed to pay rent in 1847, he went ahead and attached their property. He further noted that once the rents due were collected directly by him, he restored the mokuddums to their positions, and asked the ryots to pay to them. But again in the following year they failed to pay the rents, and Bhugwan sued them.

The principal sudder ameen of Cuttack dismissed the plaintiff’s claims, arguing that, “according to Regulation VIII of 1819, he had no right to dispossess the defendants and collect the rent himself...”<sup>55</sup> The district judge, however, challenged the ameen’s decision. He pointed out that the ameen misinterpreted the legislation. He argued that, “...in Clause 11, Section XVIII of the said law it is clearly laid down, that when a summary suit for arrears of rent alleged to be due may have been instituted against an under-tenant, it shall be competent to the party who may have instituted it to...attach and collect the rent from the cultivators. And as the plaintiff asserted that he sued the defendants...for the rent of 1254...the first issue on which the principal sudder ameen should have required proof was whether the plaintiff did or did not sue for the rent of 1254?—because if he did, his subsequent attachment of the tenure was perfectly legal...”<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup>December 17, 1850, No. 55 of 1850, Appeal from a decision of Moheschunder Roy, Moonsiff of Dhumnagar, dated 8<sup>th</sup> July 1850, Kuroonee Jenna and Bhagbut Singh Singhar, (Defendants,) Appellants versus Musst. Kishen Priya Dey and Sheikh Abdool Kadir, (Plaintiffs,) Respondents, *Bengal Zillah Courts Decisions*, Cuttack, 1850, 171-2.

<sup>55</sup>August 4, 1852, No. 8 of 1851, Appeal from the decision of Tarakaunth Bidyasagur, Principal Sudder Ameen of Cuttack, dated 30<sup>th</sup> July 1851 Ketreebur Bhugwan Rai Singh, (Plaintiff,) Appellant versus Pullab Senaputty, Raghoonath Senaputty, Narain Senaputty, Ishur Swain, Jullodhur Swain, Nabin Swain, Hurry Swain, Moquddums of mouza Batban, (Defendants), Respondents, *Bengal Zillah Courts Decisions*, Cuttack, 1852, 72.

<sup>56</sup>*Ibid*, 73.

Once again, it is noticeable that the mokuddum is described as an “under-tenant” in relation to the zemindar, and the latter is allowed to independently exercise a major proprietary function, namely that of rent-collection, if the mokuddums failed to perform it. This was also another instance of directness in power, which the zemindars tried to deploy whenever they got an opportunity to do so. But the mokuddums challenged these contours of dependence, by presenting counterclaims of directness. And in doing so, they consciously imbricated themselves in a wider, comparative field of land-tenures, denying the specificities of locality, and claiming lineages of generality. This also reconfirms my earlier arguments about the category of rent. The situation outlined above demonstrates that “rent”, unlike its Ricardian formulation, defined the complexities of the field of the “political”. In this case, while the sudder ameen argued that the zemindar cannot dispossess the mokuddums and collect rents directly, suggesting the independent proprietary capacities of that tenure, the judge argued that if the zemindar sued the mokuddums for non-payment of rent, he can attach the property and collect the rents directly, even if he is not allowed to dispossess. For this statement, one of the Bengal regulations was quoted where such a tenure had been defined as an under-tenure, suggesting certain restrictions on the kind of independence the sudder ameen found in it. But the judge also suggested that, if it be proved that the mokuddums collected the rents, it had to be inferred that they got back into possession. So, a complex case of possessory and proprietary rights were sketched out by the category of rent.

But let me now turn to the issue of comparisons. Comparisons, and interplays between generalities and localization, got reinstituted from a different direction in Cuttack when it was claimed that mokuddumi mouza Bingarpore was not an “under-tenure” of Kotdes zemindarry. The mokuddums, Damoodur and Kirtebas wished to hold it as an independent estate, paying directly and separately to the government. The plaintiffs argued that the Kotdes zemindarry, in which the mouza is situated, was formerly the property of the Rajahs of Orissa. During their rule, the plaintiff’s ancestor, Gopal Das Punda acquired Bingarpore as a grant, for which he used to pay a small quit rent to the Rajahs. But when the Moguls came to rule the region, their nazim assessed it and converted it into a mokudumi. The plaintiff’s ancestors, at that time, retained the proprietary right, and paid rent for the mouza directly to the government. After this, the Maratha rule began, during which he continued to pay rent direct into the government treasury.

Over the several years of Maratha rule, the plaintiff's ancestors paid rent to different officials of the government, including the son of the Amil, Narain Chotra, for a brief while. When the British arrived, they initially paid, as before, straight to the government. But in 1806, Narain Chotra somehow managed to pose as the zemindar of Kotdes, and offered the collector 1000 cahuns in excess of the jumma paid by Bhugwan Das, the plaintiff's father, for Bingarpore. The collector at that time attached it, with other mokuddumis and villages, to Kotdes, refusing to hear Bhugwan Das's claim to independence and separation. Subsequent to Narain Chotra's death, the plaintiffs paid rent to Ketrabas Mungraj, the zemindar, holding on to their dependent capacity, awaiting the future settlement. When they put forward the claim for separation to the settlement officer, he referred them to the civil court.

The defendant refused to admit any right of the plaintiff to hold Bingarpore independently, arguing that it was always part of the Kotdes zemindary. He also denied that the plaintiff possessed any mokudumi title, stating that "as the Mahratta Government, which was despotic and tyrannical, conferred the entire estate, Kotdes, on his ancestors, it matters not what rights any other persons might previously have possessed therein, as they were all cancelled by the said grant..."<sup>57</sup> This statement is suggestive. It shows that constitutive linkages between "despotism" and "property", in defining the "political", were not drawn only by British administrators. They were strategically deployed by local landlords as well. In this case, the zemindar seemed to argue that since despotism, or absolute powers of the sovereign, was the foundation of property, the variety of ancient interests attached to land got overrun in the violence of its originary moment. I have shown that within British administrative discourse, or different framings of the "political", the relation between "despotism" and "property" was understood in different ways. While James Mill characterized pre-British governments in terms of a despotic practice which destroyed all forms of property in land, other administrators, and Richard Jones, admitted "despotism" more as a potential than as a regularized practice, which allowed them to identify different tenures in different localities as embodying traces of a variety of proprietary rights. However, the zemindar in this case, echoing Mill, defined despotism as a successful practice of the Maratha government.

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<sup>57</sup>February 19, 1851, No. 14 of 1850, Appeal from a decision of Tarrakaunth Bidya Sagur, Principal Sudder Ameen of Cuttack, dated 26<sup>th</sup> August 1850, Chowdree Damoodur Das and Chowdree Kirtebas Das (Plaintiffs,) Appellants versus Kirtebus Mungraj, and after his demise Khettry Bur Bhugwan Rhyut Singh, (Defendants,) Respondents, *Bengal Zillah Courts Decisions*, Cuttack, 1851, 17.

After going through the details of the case, the principal sudder ameen argued that the provisions of Rule XI of Regulation XII of 1805, which declared that “...in all cases in which the revenue of a village had for upwards of five years past, been paid direct to Government by the hereditary mokuddum, the settlement of such village should be made with the hereditary mokuddum...”<sup>58</sup> should be the basis for the decision. In this instance, he pointed out that although the plaintiffs possessed the title of a mouroosee mokuddumee in the mouza, and paid revenue direct to the government from 1801 to 1805, it was not proved that they did so for upwards of five years prior to the date of the proclamation, that was 15<sup>th</sup> September 1804. It was found that till 1800 they paid through the zemindars. Accordingly, he dismissed their claim.

Against this decision, the mokuddums argued that their claims should not be judged by the Regulation XII of 1805, which was meant specifically for Cuttack. They pointed out that in this case “...all other laws and regulations promulgated for the trial of civil suits in the provinces of Bengal and Orissa were applicable, and that more especially, according to Clauses 3 and 4, Section 5, Regulation VIII of 1793, their claim to separation had been established.”<sup>59</sup> The regulation quoted by the mokuddums declared that the revenue demand should be settled with “the actual proprietors of the soil, of whatever description, whether zemindars, talukdars, or chowdris.”<sup>60</sup> The play of generalization and localization continued. In this case, it was the mokuddums of Cuttack, who refused to be classified strictly as an incomparably local form of landholders. Instead they demanded to be recognized as similar to the chowdris of Bengal, thereby, also suggesting, like Harrington, that provisions admitting a variety of landholders, other than the zemindars, as actual proprietors of the soil, were embedded within the regulations of the permanent settlement itself. This shows that their claim for an independent proprietary status was couched within a self-stylization that resisted the definition of the “local” as an irreducibly specific form of the “political”. By drawing legitimacy for such a self-representation from the permanent settlement regulations of Bengal Presidency, these mokuddums challenged the particular discursive deployment of the twin specificities of time and space, by

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<sup>58</sup>Ibid.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid.

<sup>60</sup>F.G. Wigley (ed.), *The Eastern Bengal and Assam Code, In Three Volumes Containing The Regulations and Local Acts in Force in the Province of Eastern Bengal and Assam, Volume 1*, Calcutta, 1907, 28.

which, as I argued earlier, forms of property in different localities were arranged in the first half of the nineteenth century. While their mode of negotiation was crafted in the language of the prevalent discursive classification of property, it simultaneously overturned the fundamental tools of that operation, by reconfiguring the established relation between generalizations and localizations. Such were the various limits of the independent proprietary position of the village-level landholders in Cuttack, each of which, in the process of contestation, opened up ground for new interplays between generalizations and localizations.

### **Different alliances, same aims: the unending games of power**

Contests between zemindars and village-level landholders, however, did not exhaust the field of power around land in Cuttack. There were many more disputes over proprietary privileges between these groups and landholders of other grades. According to the particular dynamics of each dispute, alliances and enmities were developed between these landholders. But once again, in each of these changing situations, superior landholders always tried to oust, or disempower inferior ones, in order to achieve a mastery over the “local”, that is, be enabled to exercise a direct form of power over land. As I have argued in this chapter, directness, as a form of power, defined the “local”, and emerged as the quintessential logic of governance of the “political” in the first half of the nineteenth century. Among the several landholders in Cuttack as well, attempts to achieve directness marked the domain of disputes. Not only did this logic characterize the conflicts between the more powerful landholders, it shaped strategies of struggle between every member of this field of power.

In the dispute over the proprietary right of mouza Mundalow, pergunnah Asseressur, the usual locations of power seemed to be in disarray. Here the mokuddums, contrary to their usual position, acted as rent-payers to a lakhirajdar, who, in turn, was the rent-receiver. The mouza was granted in 1782 to Rajesh Bhutt as a rent-free holding. He was succeeded by his son Juggunath, who being childless, adopted a son, called Rughoonath. The latter died suddenly of snake-bite in 1839. At this point the dispute arose over the proprietary right of the mouza. While Rughoonath’s aunt, Nulleta Bhai claimed the mouza as her property, mokuddum Bhowree Naik argued that since “...he had all along held the estate as mokuddum,

upon a jumma of 1200 Kahans of Cowries, which has been paid from the date of the Lakhiraj sunnud, to the Lakhirajdar.”<sup>61</sup>, the proprietary right should devolve to him. There were two issues at stake here. On the one hand, the government tried to find out, through pundits, whether a Bremutter land could pass on to a person who is not a lineal descendant of Juggunath Bhutt, to whom the lands were originally bequeathed by the donor. On the other, the mokuddum’s claim that the mouza formed part of his mokuddumi had to be validated, as Nulleeta Bhai stated that he was merely a gomashah. The matter could not be settled as opposing decisions were passed by different officials. While the deputy collector admitted the mokuddum’s claim, the commissioner cancelled it, and ordered that Nulleeta should be put in possession as the rightful proprietor. Eventually the case was sent for further review.

Even without knowing the final judgment on the case, it can be inferred that the mokuddums, as rent-receivers, were involved in a subordinate capacity with the mouza, which they tried to get rid off, as soon as an opportunity arose of questioning the proprietary status of the lakhirajdar. Just as the zemindars tried to do with the mokuddums, here, the mokuddums reproduced the same strategy of ousting the lakhirajdar—who, in this case, was posited as an “intermediary” vis-à-vis the mokuddums—and effecting direct power over land. The particular constellation of power at play in this case also reformulated the category of the village. The “village” was imagined as a field of power, all members of which, through different forms of relations to land, remained under the general domination of the village-proprietor. In this imagination, the lakhirajdar was understood as one such bonafide member of the “village”. However, as this dispute revealed, the lakhirajdar was the proprietor of a village, and the mokuddum, or the village-proprietor, was subordinate to him.

The language of the battles between zemindars and village-level landholders got rearticulated in an amazingly exact manner when the lakhirajdar of mouza Oopurbust wanted to oust the pudhans of the village, claiming that they were merely contractual farmers. The village had been measured and settled by a government official in 1830 at Rs. 225-8-18 which the pudhans engaged for, and paid to the lakhirajdar for eleven years. At the end of this period, the lakhirajdar petitioned the authorities wishing to get rid of the pudhans “...on the grounds of the term of their engagement having expired, and of their being only farmers, and to have new

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<sup>61</sup>“To Commissioner, Cuttack from Officiating Collector, Cuttack”, August 17, 1842, No. 185, *SBORP*.

engagements taken from the ryots to pay their rent directly to himself...”<sup>62</sup> The demand of the lakhirajdar was admitted by the deputy collector, whose decision was confirmed by the collector. Accordingly, the lakhirajdar, after the new settlement increased the rents of the mouza. At this point a thanee ryot of the mouza instituted a suit against him, arguing that earlier when he paid rent to the pudhans, he had to pay less, but the new settlement makes him pay more to the lakhirajdar. The pudhans, in combination with the thanee ryot, claimed that the lakhirajdar is only entitled to a fixed amount of rent, that is, the “sudder jumma assessed on the village from them.”<sup>63</sup>

It is evident that the persistent logic of removing “intermediaries” as obstructions in the path of a direct exercise of power was at play here. But it was no longer an exclusively governmental discourse; rather, it was being shared by all actors in the locality. Thus, the figure of the “intermediary” changed according to the specificities of conflict in different contexts. The lakhirajdar was entitled to an amount from the land, which is the full rental, including the amount classified as revenue, otherwise payable to the state. But due to the existence of the pudhans he got a truncated amount, after deducting the allowances of the former. Since what is involved in this dispute is a rent-free land, it is to be kept in mind that for this land the state did not receive its share of the rent, categorized as revenue. This share went to the lakhirajdar, who, in this dispute, therefore, wished to exercise a total and direct authority over its property, by extracting the full dues from it, and, in the process, destroying the shared and plural matrix of rights that was perceived as proprietary, and upheld in their respective locations by strategies of governance. In this case the district judge eventually ruled that the pudhans also had a proprietary right in the mouza, and could not be ousted. He noted that the settlement had to be formed with them, although there could be a re-assessment of the assets of the mouza. However, he insisted that under no circumstances can the lakhirajdar collect directly from the ryots. Proprietary rights were retained as plural and distributed. This also reflected the advantages gained out of such plurality by lower-scale landholders/cultivators.

Thus it can be argued against Sirajul Islam’s conclusions, that tiers of landholding did not always exercise pressure on the cultivators, because, unlike the

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<sup>62</sup>April 14, 1847, A regular appeal from a decision passed by the Moonsiff of Pooree, dated 15<sup>th</sup> December 1846, Udhakaree Neeladree Das, (Defendant,) Appellant, versus, Ram Majee (Plaintiff,) and Mhaddeb, Hurreechendun and Moost. Upna, widow of Hurhur Koour Gooroo (Opponents,) Respondents, *Bengal Zillah Courts Decisions*, Cuttack, 1847.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid.

permanently-settled regions of Bengal, in Cuttack, where village-level landholders of various kinds were recognized by the government as authentic proprietors, and the mofussil jumma was settled with them, the difference between the sudder jumma and the mofussil jumma increased with greater numbers of such legitimate “intermediaries”. And this situation was known to the ryot, who could therefore mobilize it to his own advantage. The more such “intermediaries”, the less the ryot had to pay as rent, which is why, in this case, the removal of the pudhans translated into an increase of the rent for the thanee ryot, and he united with the pudhans to resist the directness of power aimed at by the lakhirajdar.<sup>64</sup>

Sirajul Islam, echoing Ratnalekha Ray, explains the rise to prominence of particular agrarian groups in Bengal in the early decades of the nineteenth century in terms of purely indigenous structures and processes. These groups, namely, the jotedars, guntidars, mandals, pradhans, have been categorized by both scholars, as “intermediaries”. Such a labelling is based on the assumption that these groups were obstructions to a more direct form of power in agrarian relations between big landlords and small cultivators. Accordingly, Sirajul Islam argues that such “intermediaries” were a non-productive, extractive presence on land, and necessarily detrimental to the interests of the peasant cultivators. The growth of these groups is also seen, by both Islam and Ray, as an unintended effect of colonial misperceptions. Both scholars, therefore, view the history of agrarian relations in Bengal as a relentless struggle between the colonial state and these proliferating “intermediaries”. They explain the powerful position of such village-level landholders in different areas of Bengal as the development of indigenous forces, lying outside the discursive structure of colonial governance.

In this dissertation, I argue, that village-level landholders could assume importance in the topography of agrarian power-relations, not due to the overturning of colonial governmental force by indigenous equations of landed power. On the contrary, it was the emergent discursive production of the “political”, out of a particular articulation of variously reconfigured political-economic frameworks, which guaranteed these landholders a privileged position amongst a number of agrarian groups. Not only did this happen in Cuttack, or the North-western Provinces, where the “village-zemindar” was favoured over the big landlords as the more

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<sup>64</sup>Sirajul Islam, *Bengal Land Tenure: The origin and growth of intermediate interests in the 19<sup>th</sup> century*, Rotterdam, 1985.



authentic proprietor and a better improver, but the same logic could also be viewed as operational in the permanently-settled areas of Bengal, where, as early as 1812, with the legal recognition of the Pattani tenure in the Burdwan division, certain forms of village-level landholding got recognized juridically as authentic proprietary titles. As Islam notes, by this regulation all Pattani tenures became “...heritable, transferable by sale, gift or otherwise, at the discretion of the holder and he would be treated in the courts *as if he were the zamindar*.”<sup>65</sup> This shows that even in the older areas of Bengal, right from the beginning of the nineteenth century, juridical measures started redefining so-called “intermediaries”, like Pattanidars, as authentic proprietary landlords.

By calling these landholders “intermediaries”, therefore, Ray and Islam reproduce the same colonial logic, of a desired directness of power, which marked the governance of the “political” in this period. As I am arguing in this chapter, this discursive logic was shared by all actors in the locality; all of them acted within the framework of this discourse. The state, the zemindars, the village-level landholders, the lakhirajdars, the thanee ryots—each of these landholders, depending on the specific dynamics of the situation, wished to attain a directness of power, and described other contestants in the field, as obstructive “intermediaries”.<sup>66</sup>

The need to maintain plurality in proprietary rights engendered multiple and shifting alliances between various kinds of landholders in Cuttack. These alliances often upset familiar equations between zemindars, farmers, mokuddums and ryots. The case I am going to discuss offers such an example—of complex and layered equations between these landholders giving rise to a property intrigue which went beyond the usual calculus of power. In 1849 Nubeen Mahapatur instituted a suit claiming possession of a 4 annas share of moqudumee mouza Bayharpore, worth Rs. 1512-4-7. The plaintiff stated that when the mouza was advertised for sale in 1843, the mokuddums engaged to pay him Rs. 59-2 within a month, and executed an instalment bond agreeing to pay the remaining amount with interest in the course of ten years. In a few years time, by 1847, as the mokuddums failed to pay the instalments, Nubeen sold an eight annas share of the mouza to others and himself purchased the remaining eight annas share. Thereafter he collected some rents from

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<sup>65</sup>Ibid, 27, emphasis mine.

<sup>66</sup>See Ratnalekha Ray, *Change in Bengal Agrarian Society: 1760-1850*, New Delhi, 1979, and Islam, *Bengal Land Tenure*.

that portion, and applied to get his name registered as the proprietor of an eight annas share of the mouza. At this point he was told by the Canoongoe of the pergunnah that Gocoolanund Mhaintee, the nephew of the former mokuddums, was in possession of the property on a lease granted by them since 1847. Nubeen's claim to the proprietary title of the mouza was dismissed by the deputy collector, but later upheld by the collector on appeal.

Now the zemindar in whose estate the mouza was situated, sued Nubeen for arrears of rent, and having obtained a decree, caused a four annas share of his eight annas to be sold. In order to get the rent due from the remaining four annas, Nubeen sued the ryots, but Gocoolanund Mhaintee stated that he held the lease of one half of the mouza. The deputy collector dismissed Gocoolanund's claim, following which the ryots appealed to the commissioner against this decision, who upheld their appeal. This led Nubeen to institute the present suit, claiming the proprietary rights over a four annas share of the mouza. Nubeen argued that, "...if Gocoolanund Mhaintee had obtained a lease of the property before it was purchased by him, he would have represented the fact at the time of the sale...and the ryots, instead of stating that they had paid the rents...to the former mokuddums, when he demanded it from them, would have said that they had paid it to the ijaradar; and the ijaradar should have paid rent to him, the plaintiff, or, if he would not have accepted it, to the zemindar...and not having done so, it was clear that the zemindar and the former mokuddums to defraud him had prepared the ijara pottah in favor of Gocoolanund Mhaintee, and inserted his name in the putwarry papers..."<sup>67</sup> Nubeen thought that every stakeholder in the dispersed networks of power embedded in the mouza conspired against him. From his perspective, the zemindar, the mokuddums, the farmer and the ryots had a shared interest in preventing him from acquiring any kind of control over the mouza.

Quite obviously, the zemindar, the mokuddums, and the farmer denied these allegations of collusion. However, the principal sudder ameen refused to accept the claim of the farmer. He noted that the ijara pottah was not a genuine document. Moreover, he argued that since the mokuddums had mortgaged the property to Nubeen, "they were restricted by the terms of the deed of mortgage from alienating or

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<sup>67</sup>March 6, 1850, Appeal from the decision of Tarrakaunth Bidya Sagur, Principal Sudder Ameen of Cuttack, dated 13<sup>th</sup> November 1849, Case No. 21 of 1849, Bhugwan Putnaik, Zemindar, (Defendant.) Appellant, versus Nubeen Mahapatur, (Plaintiff.) Respondent, Appeal Case No. 22 of 1849, Gocoolanund Mhaintee, Ijaradar, (Defendant.) Appellant versus Nubeen Mahapatur (Plaintiff.) Respondent, *Bengal Zillah Courts Decisions*, Cuttack, 1850, 40.

disposing of it, their granting a 21 years' lease of it was tantamount to selling the property, and consequently the lease could not be upheld."<sup>68</sup> The ameen decreed in favor of Nubeen, and his decision was upheld by the district judge. Conspiracy or not, it is quite evident that Nubeen faced opposition from all quarters as he tried to gain control over the mouza. Existent landholders, of different ranks, seemed to have suddenly lost the usual enmities amongst themselves when it came to resisting Nabeen. That is why the mokuddums, in this case, did not try to fight a farmer; neither did the zemindar get into an overt conflict with the mokuddums. Even the ryots, instead of paying to Nubeen, paid to the former mokuddums, despite the fact that they claimed to have leased out the mouza to the farmer. Once again, it was a conflict between directness and dispersal of power. The only difference was that in its enactment unusual solidarities, and shifting alliances were developed. Governance functioned in its usual manner, by retaining both plurality and directness, by discriminating between their legitimate and illegitimate formations. Nubeen was granted his right, which inserted him, as one more stakeholder, along with the zemindar and the ryots, over the proprietary rights of the mouza. But at the same time, the mokuddums and the ijaradar were carefully dissociated from this matrix, due to their illegitimate locations in it. In this case, the other contestants in the field used the dispersal of power to their advantage in order to prevent the entry of yet another claimant to their domain of control. This shows that both dispersal and directness, as strategies, were used by different actors to generate changing alliances and shifting aims in the by-lanes of disputes in the locality.

## Conclusion

This chapter executes an important methodological move. It completes the perspective of the dissertation. It brings us back to a locality, and its intimate, quotidian affairs. Through this chapter, I wish to reiterate an important theoretical point. Analyzing agrarian power in British India in terms of an apparatus, or an interconnected discursive space, does not require abandoning a close scrutiny of localities. On the contrary, this dissertation has been all about localities. But it has refused to adopt the locality as *the* analytical perspective. I have chosen, therefore, to

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<sup>68</sup>Ibid, 41.

travel with, to, along, and through localities. This analytical strategy has allowed me to understand both what happened in the corridors of agrarian power in Cuttack, and what happened elsewhere which was important for Cuttack. In this chapter, therefore, I have tried to make sense of a gamut of events, peoples, conflicts, and ideas occurring in Cuttack over the first fifty years of the nineteenth century in terms of their conversations—both congruent and incongruent—with practices outside Cuttack. By taking a deep plunge into these events, I have been able to track the emergent configurations of power in Cuttack. The specificities of these conflicts, in turn, have enabled me to better understand the nature of the process by which the “political” and the “local” came together to determine the topography of agrarian power in British India.

This chapter shows that the twin articulation of the “political”, of dispersal and directness of power, fought with each other in localities. The foregrounding of the figure of the “village-zemindar”, as a reconfigured deployment of the vision of the ancient ryot as the authentic peasant-proprietor, became crucial in determining in which direction agrarian power would flow in a locality. Events in Cuttack clearly bear out its implications. The governmental urge to uphold direct forms of power as authentic ones were shared by all landholders of the locality, as they tried to strike each other off from the field. Each claimed authenticity in the language of immediacy, depicting the other either as an obstructive, illegitimate, “intermediary”, or as a wasteful, inauthentic, contractual “farmer”. While village-level landholders were certainly favoured by the government in these battles, due to the presence of the other articulation of the “political” which construed agrarian power in India as dispersed, there could not be a total victory of the village forces over the big landlords. But the power-equations of the locality certainly tended to drift towards the supremacy of the former. By the end of the nineteenth century, therefore, the “village”, with its attendant figure-heads, became the principal field of power in a locality. Henceforth, as the conclusion to this dissertation will argue, the “village” became even more important, as new markers of power emerged in the second half of the century with their roots in the “village”. The scope of the agrarian widened, its power-bearers increased and localities got characterized with new relations of power around land; the structure of the “political” which was set up over the first fifty years of the

nineteenth century served as the foundation for new kinds of differentiation, heterogeneity, and diversification.

## **Chapter Seven**

### **Rewriting production**

#### **The revenue-production, politics-economics separation**

Why is this dissertation about agrarian production, when all that it seems to discuss is agrarian power in localities? This has been posed as a question, and answered in different ways over six chapters. But in concluding, I will try to restate theoretically the argument about production. My perspective on production speaks directly to the dominant historiographical characterisation of agrarian affairs in the nineteenth century. I have looked at agrarian societies over the first half of the nineteenth-century. Almost all agrarian histories of British India view agrarian governance in this period as delinked from, and also, opposed to, production. Governmental engagement with agrarian production, these histories argue, began from the late nineteenth century. This thematic separation of periods, therefore, provides us with a definition of what these histories consider as agrarian production. The same definition also tells us what marked the first half of the nineteenth century—something which is different from, in being antithetical to, agrarian production. In the first half of the nineteenth century, these histories argue, the government was solely interested in the extraction of revenue. The development of different models of settlement in the different regions of British India during this period reflected this agenda. These were basically programs of revenue-generation from land. To execute these programs, the government created its agents of extraction in the various localities. These local collaborators emerged as the power-holders of these agrarian societies. In contrast to this, later in the nineteenth-century, the government became more interested in cultivating knowledge about the practices of agricultural production. It developed an entire infrastructure in order to promote methods and implements of production. The domain of production was assembled as a distinct object of knowledge and intervention over the second half of the nineteenth century, and it continued with greater vigor into the first half of the twentieth century.

The clearest statement of this thematic division of the agrarian past comes from David Ludden. In the light of this argument, Ludden remarks about the early nineteenth century: “The politics of revenue overshadowed the economics of

production in the Company's relation to agrarian India."<sup>1</sup> This statement, I argue, captures the central premise of the differentiation between "revenue" and "production". Ludden makes "revenue" equivalent to "politics", and "production" to "economics". These equivalences constitute the theoretical core of his argument, which understand "politics" as something external and opposed to, "economics". Accordingly, Ludden locates late nineteenth century as the point of departure for the governmental interest in production. He argues that it is with the famines in the 1860s, 70s and 80s—during which departments of agriculture were opened all over the country—that the regime of governmental investment in agricultural production began. He notes that, "Stimulated by riots and famines, which indicated deep distress in agrarian India, a flood of texts ensued on agricultural improvement..."<sup>2</sup>

Agricultural "improvement" through scientific methods indeed became one of the central concerns of the government in the aftermath of a series of deadly famines during the last three decades of the nineteenth century. The first Famine Commission wrote its report after the famine in 1866, which devastated the entire region of the present-day state of Orissa, its epicentre being the Cuttack division.<sup>3</sup> The need to protect the country against such calamities was expressed in the report. But it was noted that without systematic information on agricultural conditions of the area, it would not be possible to institute preventive measures.<sup>4</sup> It was primarily with the Famine Commission Report of 1880 that a compelling need to improve an agriculturally malignant country was articulated. The report argued that an entire set of new knowledge about the conditions of people living on land was required to design strategies of agricultural "improvement." It noted that there was total absence "...of trustworthy statistical knowledge as to the numbers of the people, the rates of their deaths and births, and the influence on these rates of epidemic disease or local distress, combined with an equally insufficient insight into their economical

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<sup>1</sup>David Ludden, "Introduction: Agricultural Production and Indian History" in *Agricultural Production and Indian History*, ed. David Ludden, Delhi, 1994, 5.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid, 7.

<sup>3</sup>For a detailed description of the famine see, see Gorachand Patnaik, *The Famine and Some Aspects of the British Economic Policy in Orissa 1866-1905*, Cuttack, 1980; J. K. Samal, *Economy of Colonial Orissa, 1866-1947*, New Delhi, 2000, Ch. 4, and Brajabandhu Bhatta, "Natural Calamities in Orissa during the British Rule" in *Economic History of Orissa*, ed. N. R. Patnaik, New Delhi, 1997.

<sup>4</sup>Charles Blair, *Indian Famines: Their Historical, Financial, & Other Aspects*, Edinburgh and London, 1874, 60-62.

condition, and particularly an absence of agricultural statistics in an accessible form.”<sup>5</sup> The report argued that the peasant-cultivator, or the ryot, was in an impoverished condition due to the pressure of land-revenue, and his productive capacities had to be urgently energized, in order to nurture the overall potential of Indian agriculture. Subsequent Famine Commission reports, of 1898, and 1901, for example, continued with the same suggestions. The 1901 report noted that the different constituents of agriculture, like crops, seeds, implements, manure, cattle, etc., needed to be protected and improved by the government in order to boost the productivity of the ryot.<sup>6</sup>

David Arnold argues that such a program of “improvement” can be traced to an even earlier time, to the initial decades of the nineteenth century. He notes that the establishment of Botanical gardens in different parts of British India, the Agricultural-Horticultural Society of India and the profound influence of the Kew Gardens of London released a current of ideas and activities in this domain. Arnold observes that, “The want of capital investment, the deficiencies of Indian livestock, the crudeness of Indian agricultural implements, the want of manuring, of hedges and enclosures—all these formed part of the litany of complaints directed against Indian agriculture.”<sup>7</sup> Introduction of special plants like Sago Palm and Cassava to protect India against recurrent famine, building of canals, which were compared with the great historical monuments of Asia, from the pyramids to the Great Wall of China, all informed this project of agricultural “improvement”. While agreeing with Arnold, I will emphasise that it is towards the end of the nineteenth century that the task for designing a space of “improvement” in Indian agriculture began, following the recommendations of the Famine Commission reports. “Improvement” had to be effected by and in this space. The construction of this space involved the creation of segregated, clearly identifiable constituents of agricultural production and then investing meaning in each of them in terms of a complementary relationship, directed solely towards the goal of improvement. John Augustus Voelcker, an agricultural chemist from England, was one of the most important architects of this space. In 1893, after a rigorous, even if short-term, inquiry into the conditions of land and people in the subcontinent, he brought out the “Report on the Improvement of Indian Agriculture”. At the level of official discourse, this work was considered as one of the seminal contributions to the

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<sup>5</sup>*Report of the Indian Famine Commission*, Simla, 1880, 30.

<sup>6</sup>*Report of the Indian Famine Commission, 1901*, Calcutta, 1901, 72-73.

<sup>7</sup>David Arnold, “Agriculture and ‘Improvement’ in Early Colonial India: A Pre-History of Development”, *Journal of Agrarian Change*, 5, 4, October, 2005, 513.



promising project of agricultural “improvement”. Voelcker’s treatise became almost a manual in shaping the directions of the project.

The Voelcker report was particularly concerned with increasing the productivity of the soil. Voelcker believed that manure will act as the magic-potion for the miseries of British Indian agriculture. The report organised itself around a classificatory scheme. It was divided into the following chapters: I) Historical Introduction, III) Cultivating Classes, IV) Climate, V) Soil, VI) Water, VII) Wood, VIII) Manure, IX) Grass, X) Fodder-Crops and Hedges, XI) Livestock and Dairying, XII) Implements, XIII) Crops and Cultivation, XIV) Agricultural Industries and Exports, XV) Economic and Political Conditions, XVI) Practical Enquiry, XVII) Scientific Enquiry, XVIII) Experimental Farms, XIX) Agricultural Education and XX) Agricultural Departments.<sup>8</sup> These were the elements of agriculture, each of which was examined closely, arranged in a complementary relation to others, and finally oriented towards the grand telos of improving the productivity of the soil. These were the beginnings of the productivist regime in the governance of British Indian agriculture. It became one of the defining dimensions of nation-building in the twentieth century, as nationalists, of various kinds, built their critique of colonial rule around the issue of agricultural “improvement”. Ludden notes that, “Economic nationalism used data on agrarian conditions against the Raj. Nationalists built empirical artefacts from official statistics and joined debates about policy, using measures of progress, as others had done before... Congress agreed with government that agricultural progress required programs such as catalogued by the Royal Commission. Amid oppositions to empire, therefore, a unified paradigm for agrarian studies stretched across the political spectrum.”<sup>9</sup>

But in this entire discourse of “improvement”, “production” was understood as a domain of “economics”, while “politics” was considered as something external to it, obstructing its smooth operation. Agrarian production, which should have been an “economic” matter, it was argued, was turned into a sphere of the “political” by shrewd strategies of revenue-collection of the British government, which created wasteful, unproductive power-brokers in the localities as collaborators of this project. This was an argument shared by different positions, from colonial officials, to nationalist actors, to historians of agrarian India. Let us take the case of irrigation in

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<sup>8</sup>John Augustus Voelcker, *Report on the Improvement of Indian Agriculture*, London, 1893.

<sup>9</sup>Ludden, “Introduction”, 9.

late nineteenth century Cuttack. Cuttack was the only area in Eastern India where the British invested significantly in irrigation. This investment needs to be seen in the context of Arthur Cotton's vision of canal networks becoming the driving force behind the improvement of India's transport infrastructure in the second half of the nineteenth century.<sup>10</sup> Cotton, no doubt, primarily viewed irrigation as a question of "public works". Ravi Ahuja has argued quite convincingly that the prevalent intellectual discourse on "public works" in Europe arose from the idea of making transport infrastructure an essential part of the production process, in order to reduce overall costs of production, and increase productivity. But the questions of irrigation and productivity were also closely tied to ideas of agricultural "improvement" during this time.

The irrigation project, however, was considered to be a big failure by the authorities by the beginning of the twentieth century. It suffered great financial losses, as the government kept trying new means to persuade people in availing the benefits of irrigation canals and embankments. Rohan D' Souza explains the failure of this project in terms of a misfit between colonial capitalism's extractive needs and the natural hydrological complexity of the Orissa delta. He argues that due to the unique hydrological character of the delta, floods were beneficial for the lands in Orissa's deltaic plains. The colonial operations of flood-control, by being insensitive to the delta's natural rhythm, turned a "flood-dependent" landscape into a "flood-vulnerable" one. He points out that the rapacious colonial concerns of revenue generation disturbed the natural ecological arrangement for agriculture in deltaic Orissa.<sup>11</sup> This is how D' Souza reinforces the analytical separation between "revenue/politics" and "production/economics". Based on this assumption, he argues that there was a difference between the ecologically insensitive, revenue concerns of the local colonial bureaucracy and the ecologically conscious, scientific-developmental concerns of specialists or colonial engineers. In the latter category, he places Captain Harriss, one of the colonial engineers working on flood-protection

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<sup>10</sup>As Ravi Ahuja points out, "Cotton had insisted in his influential book 'Public Works in India' (1854) that there was scope for choice not only between railways and irrigation but also between railways and 'cheaper' (i.e. less capital-intensive) transportation facilities and that the latter alternative was preferable in each case." Ravi Ahuja, *Pathways of Empire: Circulation, 'Public Works' and Social Space in Colonial Orissa (c. 1780-1914)*, Unpublished Dissertation, University of Hannover, May, 2006, 95.

<sup>11</sup>Rohan D Souza, *Drowned and Dammed: Colonial Capitalism and Flood Control in Eastern India*, Delhi, 2006.

in the valley, who, according to D' Souza had a more "organic" understanding of the delta. This division, I argue, suffer from a flawed understanding of what I have shown in this dissertation as the political economy of production, which, in a reconfigured manner, made local power internal to, and a constitutive component of the category of production. D' Souza does not recognise the fact that the "organic" understandings of specialists were also geared towards making the delta productive, albeit in a manner which is more suited to its hydrological peculiarity. In fact, it was Arthur Cotton's scheme, another such specialist, which inaugurated the revenue-exploiting project in the delta. Such separations between "revenue-concerns" and revenue-disinterested "specialist science" appear in D' Souza's study precisely because he de-links production from the local politics of revenue extraction, instead of considering it as immanent to the "political" in political economy.

David Washbrook's characterisation of early nineteenth century agrarian governance is rooted in a similar argument. As I noted in the first chapter, Washbrook argues that the governmental treatment of landed property, as embodied in property laws and models of settlement, reflected a pragmatic strategy to collect revenue by building networks of local agents. He defines the need for this collaboration primarily in terms of the contradictory tendencies within law of promoting market enterprise and preserving older social forms at the same time. He also points out that the Company state deliberately maintained the social relations within which the agrarian economy was organised earlier in order to secure extraction of surplus and reproduce the conditions of production. This strategy resulted in a stunted growth of property rights and a capitalist market around land.<sup>12</sup> Peter Robb, on the other hand, argues that collaborative arrangements in this period were necessary because of a weak administrative structure of the Company state, lack of knowledge of the complex social relations on land, and resilience of locally dominant social forces. But an incapability to penetrate effectively into local structures went hand in hand with a desire to establish private property and capitalist market relations over land. Robb differs from Washbrook here in the sense that he indicates the presence of an active will on the part of the Company state in the early nineteenth century to transform agrarian conditions along lines of capitalist improvement. He argues that the Company-state "...had strong motives to promote agriculture as the norm, and to

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<sup>12</sup>D.A. Washbrook, "Law, State and Agrarian Society in Colonial India", *Modern Asian Studies*, 15, 3, 1981, 649-721.

order land and people, by force if necessary. There were means enough to encourage private property; there were sales laws, resumption proceedings, and a pro-landlord bias in government..... Washbrook believes that this private property was effectively delayed until the later nineteenth century. But for Bengal and Bihar it seems possible to trace an earlier grafting of Western concepts on to longer-term forms of land control...”<sup>13</sup>

Such disagreements, however, do not unsettle the historiographical consensus about the agrarian affairs of this period, which posits an opposition between political economy underlying governance and “traditional” social forms of land control constitutive of local power. This opposition continues to shape the developmental discourse of the nation. In the nationalist agenda, it is presented even more aggressively, where the development warriors are seen as ready to wage war against their most formidable enemies, namely, the local powers. It is a veritable war. In the Planning Commission of 1976, one of the bodies which had agricultural development as its prime objective was called, “Task Force on Agrarian Relations”. It observed, with martial zeal, that local power structures are “insurmountable hurdles in the path of the spread of modern technology and improved agricultural practices.”<sup>14</sup>

### **Liberalism: another look**

Karuna Mantena’s work on Henry Maine covers significant theoretical ground in building a critique of the historiography which is based on this opposition. Mantena argues that the late nineteenth century imperial strategy of “indirect rule”, by which there was a governmentalized re-invigoration of the traditional cultural and social structures of India, was not a “practical”/pragmatic accommodation with on-ground social realities. She correctly observes that, “imperial historiography has shown a marked tendency to emphasize local developments and local (imperial and native) actors as the primary agents that both propel imperial expansion and shape governance patterns... Indirect rule is thus rendered a rarefied name for a political necessity, a practical institutional solution that accommodated itself with “facts on the ground,” that is, with local conditions and structures of power. In the self-

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<sup>13</sup>Peter Robb, “Law and Agrarian Society in India: The Case of Bihar and the Nineteenth Century Tenancy Debate”, *Modern Asian Studies*, 22, 2, 1988, 321.

<sup>14</sup>As cited in S. H. Rudolph, “Introduction” to *Agrarian Power and Agricultural Productivity in South Asia*, ed. M. Desai, S.H. Rudolph, and A. Rudra, Berkeley, 1984, 12-13.

understanding of imperial administrators, indirect rule was likewise conceived of as emblematic of the practical, anti-ideological orientation of British imperial policy...”<sup>15</sup>

On the contrary, Mantena notes, the shift to “indirect rule” was a distinctly ideological one, which marked a move away from the earlier universalism of the liberal, Benthamite, utilitarian variety towards a culturalism produced primarily out of nineteenth century social theory and evolutionary anthropology. These intellectual currents and their conceptualisations of “native society” became the ideological basis of late nineteenth century imperial governance by “indirect rule”. This ideological foundation, Mantena argues, is rendered invisible, and re-presented as “practical necessity” by imperial actors and a certain strand of imperial historiography. I see Mantena’s argument as similar to mine. Even she thinks that the “practical” and the “local” are not categories external to networks of knowledge and governance, in this case a specific articulation of imperialist sociology; rather they are constitutive components of it. Mantena’s work, however, retains in a different way the periodization inherent in the historiography that I critique. She argues that the culturalism, or sociological/anthropological theory, underpinning late nineteenth century imperial governance marked a move away from the reformist universalism of early nineteenth century Benthamite liberalism. This dissertation shows that the universalism of early nineteenth century liberalism, especially its political economic articulation, was also constituted by a cultural particularism, in which the “indigenous”, or the “local”, defined the universality of its major categories, like “production”, “distribution”, “rent”, “property” and others. This was produced by what I have described in this dissertation as the interconstitutive workings of the “political” and the “local”. Mantena’s analytical framework fails to take this into consideration.

Neeladri Bhattacharya also argues that culturalism was the ideological basis of late nineteenth century colonial governance with regard to the process of the governmental codification of custom in the agrarian society of Punjab. He highlights the analytical importance of the governmental presentation of the “local” in the drives of codification. As I have argued in my chapter on the “village”, Neeladri also shows how “village elders”, and not the “pundits”, the authority on canonical Hindu texts,

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<sup>15</sup>Karuna Mantena, *Alibis of Empire: Henry Maine and the Ends of Liberal Imperialism*, India, 2010, 10.

were considered as the key to an understanding of custom. But more importantly, he correctly observes that it was not only a question of “understanding” “local” society, by depending on it blindly. It was a case of acquiring legitimacy to represent it with greater authenticity than itself. Thus, Neeladri notes, that, “To assert sovereign power the masters had to transcend their crippling reliance on native knowledge-brokers and claim their own superior right to represent local tradition.”<sup>16</sup> While Neeladri’s essay makes important points about the governmental production of the “local” in agrarian societies, it still does not deal directly with the question of the relation between production and local power. A collection of essays edited by M. Desai, S.H. Rudolph and A. Rudra tries to tackle this problem conceptually, over a range of studies on the past and present of agrarian South Asia. The volume offers extremely rich and insightful essays on the relation between power and productivity in agrarian societies of South Asia. But it remains committed to the historiographical orthodoxy in understanding power and productivity as analytically separate, antithetical categories. It argues that classical political economy is devoid of an understanding of power, and “indigenous” social forces. It emphasises that from James to John Mill, classical political economy has been an ahistorical, abstract, form of knowledge which is premised on a notion of “universal history”, taking the European experience of commercialisation and industrialisation as the standard for evaluating the rest of the world.<sup>17</sup>

In this dissertation, all along, I have tried to argue that “production” and “power” are not opposites. They are both part of discursive practices of political economy and agrarian governance. Classical political economy in early nineteenth century Britain did not only consist of universals rooted in the European experience of

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<sup>16</sup>Neeladri Bhattacharya, “Remaking Custom: The Discourse and Practice of Colonial Codification”, in *Tradition, dissent and ideology: essays in honour of Romila Thapar*, ed. R. Champakalakshmi and S. Gopal, New Delhi, 1996, 28. For another work which argues that Henry Maine’s evolutionary anthropology crucially informed the agrarian policies of late nineteenth century Punjab, see Clive Dewey, *The Official Mind and the Problem of Agrarian Indebtedness in India, 1870-1910*, PhD Dissertation, University of Cambridge, 1972. Dewey identifies a “conservative” turn in imperial thought behind the formation of these policies trying to prevent land alienation, and protect “agriculturalists”. This “conservatism”, however, has been reinterpreted by a host of studies, as modernist practices of producing the “social”, which focus on the governmental production of ethnicity and other forms of indigeneity in the late nineteenth century, manifested in the activities of an “ethnographic state”. One of the leading examples of such works is Nicholas Dirks, *Castes of the Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India*, Princeton, 2001. Dirks’s work argues that “caste” was produced by these governmental operations as the essence of “civil society” in India.

<sup>17</sup>S. H. Rudolph, “Introduction” in *Agrarian Power and Agricultural Productivity in South Asia*, ed. Meghnad Desai, Susanne Hoeber Rudolph and Ashok Rudra, Berkeley, 1984, 1-19.

economic development.<sup>18</sup> It was not a dehistoricized discourse. It was constituted by abstractions, but of a different order. These abstractions took “indigeneity” and “local” interrelations between property and political power in different nations of the world as legitimate explanatory categories of political economy. With this reinterpretation, the “political”, as the “local” became the new universal of political economy. Accordingly, I have tried to read practices of agrarian governance in British India as informed by a governmental rationality which mapped localities in terms of their differences from, and resemblances with an original, ancient, Hindu/Indian “political”. I have argued that the dynamics of events in agrarian localities worked within these frameworks. They undoubtedly challenged the general articulation of the “political”, but only in order to produce newer forms of it. This method, I have argued, enables us to understand the formation of agrarian societies in different localities in terms of internal workings of political economy. This perspective makes us look at the development of specific power-equations in localities, like the rise to dominance of village-level landed elites in Cuttack, without a total dismantling of erstwhile big landlords, and the privileging of the rights of resident peasants, along with a denial of the claims of itinerant ones, as productions of a specific articulation of a sociologised discourse of political economy. The governmental rationality which worked in the nineteenth century to produce agrarian localities in terms of such specific, concrete strategies of intervention, generating from within them arrangements of power consistent to a political economic imaginary, can be described as, following Foucault, the true principle of liberalism. It is a political technique which works, as Foucault argues, “in a sphere complementary to reality...within reality, by getting the components of reality to work in relation to each other, thanks to a series of analyses and specific arrangements.”<sup>19</sup> He further observes that it is, “...this fundamental principle that political technique must never get away from the interplay of reality with itself is profoundly linked to the general principle of what is called liberalism. The game of liberalism—not interfering, allowing free movement, letting things follow their course...basically and fundamentally means acting so that

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<sup>18</sup>For a recent unpublished work which looks at political economy in eighteenth and nineteenth century Europe and the East India Company’s practices of governance as a single, integrated, dialectical, discursive space, see Rahul Govind, *The Antinomies of Political Economy Within the Dialectic of Imperialism: The East India Company as Perspective, 1689-1821*, PhD Thesis, Columbia University, 2008.

<sup>19</sup>Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the College De France, 1977-78*, London, 2007, 69.

reality develops, goes its way, and follows its own course according to the laws, principles, and mechanisms of reality itself.”<sup>20</sup> This thesis, therefore, argues that local power was a constitutive condition of political economy in nineteenth century British India. It is important to understand production in agrarian societies as internal to power. Such are the enigmatic imprints of liberalism on the past and present of agrarian South Asia.

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<sup>20</sup>Ibid, 70. For Foucault, as Michell Dean argues, “politics is never, even in the most immediate or brutal action of the exercise of domination and power, without some degree of “thought”. This is the first part of his thesis on political rationality. The second part is that this “thought”, this political rationality, does not simply arise from the rulers consulting their “interests”, or their capacity for rational choice, but from historically developed and modified forms of rationality. Political rationality, in this sense, is anterior to political action and a condition of it.” Mitchell Dean, *Foucault’s Methods and Historical Sociology*, London & New York, 1994, 182.



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